

**Feminist Responses to the Right-wing Governance in Hungary:
The Emergence of Anti-gender Feminism**

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Abstract

This dissertation employs ethnographic data about Hungary's feminist activist and academic circles to explore the impacts of right-wing anti-gender politics on feminist activists and scholars in Hungary. The right-wing anti-gender context presented multiple challenges to the feminist actors, such as increased visibility of their work in a hostile climate and decreased political and financial support. Feminist actors coped with the restrictive political context by either openly opposing the right-wing politics, self-censoring, deploying strategic language and activities, or leaving the country. The right-wing Anti-gender climate also contributed to the intensification of the debates among various feminist groups. The debates focused on finding feminist strategies for surviving within the hostile, right-wing anti-gender context.

I argue that the tensions brought to the Hungarian feminist movement by the right-wing, anti-gender climate contributed to the emergence and discursive dominance of what I call *anti-gender feminism*. Anti-gender feminist discourse is articulated as a “new” and “progressive” feminist strategy for overcoming the critiques of gender-related work by right-wing anti-gender actors. Anti-gender feminism is grounded in a particular articulation of leftist perspectives and claims that the feminist movement must center on the needs of the majority of women and appeal to the sensibilities of “everyday people”. According to this discourse, a leftist perspective allows for overcoming the failings of liberal feminist approaches, for example, West-imposed identitarian struggles. According to anti-gender feminist arguments, such approaches dismiss the structural reasons for inequalities affecting the wider public and result in hostility towards feminist initiatives. In its desire to appeal to the wider masses, and operate without interference from the right-wing government, anti-gender feminist discourse distances itself from other marginalized struggles such as trans and sex-workers' rights and racial justice. It also brings feminist arguments dangerously close to the white-supremacist, nationalist-populist rhetoric of the Hungarian state.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In August 2018, the Rector's Office at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest received a large document containing a draft of the amendment to the higher education law, detailing numerous legal changes to the Hungarian educational system. Together with various small-scale and routine changes to academic procedures, the draft amendment also informed the university about removing Gender Studies from the list of accredited programs in Hungary. This meant the MA program in Gender Studies at ELTE could no longer issue diplomas to its future students and had to close down. The first-ever Hungarian language MA program in Gender Studies received its accreditation just a year before and was about to accept its second cohort of students. The university had a day and a half to officially respond to the proposed changes. The employees of the Rectors Office contacted Etel, one of the program's founders and a participant in my research for this dissertation. On vacation and in a different time zone, Etel spent a sleepless night drafting a response with her colleagues. University leadership issued a statement calling the abolition of gender studies programs an infringement on academic freedom and interference in university's internal affairs. The Rector also had to return from a vacation from Greece to make a statement against the change. International feminist organizations and universities quickly started issuing statements of support to the program, and local students organized one of the largest protests in Hungary's recent history, however, the government had made up its mind. The first Hungarian language program in Gender Studies had to close after a year of operation.

The Hungarian government responded to the local and international uproar about its decision to abolish Gender Studies by stating that not only was the program a drain on the national budget by producing unemployable graduates, but Gender Studies didn't constitute an

academic discipline (Barát, 2022). It was, according to them, an ideology, like communism, that Hungary had already experienced and escaped. “Gender ideology”, they claimed, preached ideas that were against Hungary’s national interests. Gender theorists propagated values against the laws of human nature, against the division of society between men and women, against families, and against the well-being of Hungarian children. Gender ideology, according to the government, threatened the very survival of humans as species (Barát, 2022).

The abolition of MA program in Gender Studies in Hungary in the middle of summer was sudden, but not altogether unexpected for the Hungarian feminist community. The right-wing party Fidesz, which in 2018 controlled the national government, had opposed numerous gender equality initiatives and centred heterosexual families and demographic issues in its nationalist-populist politics since its election in 2010 (Kriszan & Sebestyen, 2019, 78). But what was significant about the governmental discourse on gender this time was its depiction of gender scholarship as a totalitarian ideology and a central threat to Hungarian nationhood. The media campaign preceding the closure of the program also utilized similar arguments. For example, in an interview on national television, Etel was asked why she wanted to change the sex of their students. Hungary’s governmental and media discourse before and during the closure of Gender Studies in the country neatly fit the mould of what many scholars have described as anti-gender campaigns and rhetoric.

Within the last ten years (2012-2022) the rise of right-wing political organizations worldwide and their use of concepts such as “gender ideology” or “genderism” has become one of the central concerns for academic or activist feminist discussions. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte's (2017) now-famous book titled *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* was one of the first attempts to bring together the examples of anti-gender

rhetoric from various countries of Europe in order to understand commonalities and differences between them. The publication was soon followed by numerous popular and academic articles from around the globe (i.e. Apperly, 2019; Butler, 2019; Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Griffon et al., 2019; Kováts, 2021; Roth, 2018; Scheele et al., 2022). This literature aims at understanding, explaining and documenting anti-gender campaigns and movements in various locations together with emphasizing their transnational connections. Eastern Europe is an especially important site of investigation in these discussions, as various Eastern European states have witnessed a particularly sharp rise in popularity of right-wing anti-gender rhetoric. In some cases, like Hungary, it has become official state discourse as well (Köttig et al., 2016; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

“Gender ideology”, “gender theory” or “genderism” are concepts mainly used by right-wing, populist or, in some cases, self-described anti-gender movements in various locations in their efforts to oppose gender and sexual rights initiatives, state investment in diverse gender equality policies and to undermine gender studies as a discipline of academic value (Köttig et al., 2016). As Kovats (2016) describes, gender is used as a “catch-all word” in these discourses and signifies chaos and destruction for “common people” and “common-sense” caused by women’s and LGBTQ rights initiatives and the “counterintuitive” theories of gender. Quoting prominent gender theorists such as Judith Butler or Simone De Beauvoir, the proponents of anti-genderism argue that gender theory replaces ‘real’ or ‘biological’ sex differences with the idea of gender, which has no biological essence. Such separation, according to them, allows for the possibilities of multiple genders and undermines the “natural” organization of societies into males and females and heterosexual family units (Köttig et al., 2016; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). This presentation of gender scholarship enables anti-gender actors to depict various equality-oriented

legal, policy or social initiatives, supposedly upheld by powerful liberal lobbies, as “trojan horses” which, under the guise of progress, promote a “culture of death”, and lead to the end of the humankind as we know it (Kováts, 2018; Kovats & Poim, 2015). In this sense, Koroleczuk & Graff (2018) observe, terms such as gender and “gender theory” not only become empty signifiers or flexible synonyms for any conservative moral issue, but also depict gender as an ideology of global neoliberal elites, which according to its proponents is “worse than Communism and Nazism put together” (Graff, 2014, p 432).

Despite the interest in researching anti-gender movements and campaigns, and the threats they pose to feminist activism and scholarship, (discussed in the next section of this chapter) to date there is little known about the impact of the right-wing, anti-gender climate on feminist movements in different locations and especially where anti-gender organizing has been successful in opposing gender-equality initiatives and feminist work or when anti-gender politics are entrenched in state policies and practices.

Hungary is one such place. Hungary has been governed by the right-wing political party Fidesz since 2010, internationally known for its dismantling of democratic institutions, anti-immigrant politics and, more recently, by its strong opposition to so-called “gender ideology” (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Wilkin, 2018). In addition to closing the Gender Studies program, the Fidesz led Hungarian government refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention (a binding treaty indicating a government’s commitment to combat violence against women) due to it containing the term gender – which allegedly threatened Hungarian nationhood (France-Presse, 2020). In 2021, the Hungarian parliament adopted a law prohibiting sharing LGBTQ-related content with minors (Parker & Morris, 2021). It also made it legally impossible for the trans community to change their gender by claiming that gender doesn’t exist and that biological sex is not

changeable (Wareham, 2020). A decade-long governance by a traditionalist, right-wing political party, committed to institutionally and legally attacking so-called gender ideology provides a good example for investigating how anti-gender politics and discourses can affect, restrict and/or change feminist movements. This dissertation employs ethnographic data about Hungary's feminist activist and academic circles, in order to answer the following questions: How do feminist scholars and activists respond to accusations put forward by the right-wing proponents about the destructive nature of gender or about their complicity in the so-called "liberal conspiracy"? How does the right-wing anti-gender climate impact their professional or personal lives and feminist goals? How do they navigate, resist, and challenge a hostile social and political environment?

As I discuss in Chapter 2, I chose feminist ethnography as a research methodology for answering these research questions, as it enabled me to collect on-the-ground, detailed and personal accounts about the changes that have been going on within the feminist movement in Hungary during the last ten years. Scholars have detailed the political and legal changes that resulted from the right-wing anti-gender climate in Hungary (Kriszan & Sebestyen, 2019), but such analyses do not allow us to see the complex impacts that these changes pose for feminist actors. Based on the principles of self-reflectivity and intersectionality (Davis & Craven, 2016), feminist ethnography allowed me to give voice to those directly affected by and living within the hostile context. It allowed me to reveal diverse perspectives of the main subjects of my research: feminist scholars and academics. I conducted my research in the Fall of 2019 in Budapest, Hungary. During the fieldwork, I spent time in feminist networks and communities in the city, attended feminist organization and academic group discussions and public political protests and

conducted thirty-nine interviews with feminist activists and scholars. This dissertation is based on the insights collected through this process.

The findings of my research suggest that the right-wing and anti-gender climate has had an immense impact on feminist activists and scholars. Anti-gender rhetoric exposed feminist work not only as unlikable but as a political threat to the very existence of the Hungarian nation. This rhetoric increased the visibility of feminist work, which mobilized smaller liberal groups and student communities in support of feminist causes. However, it also contributed to the increased hostility towards feminist actors by the wider public and government supporters. Opportunities for conducting feminist work were reduced. Funding opportunities were reduced for feminist organizations and research grants became unattainable for feminist scholars. They became targets of right-wing media as well as far-right social groups. Feminist actors coped with the restrictive climate by either openly opposing the right-wing climate, self-censoring, deploying strategic language and activities, or leaving the country.

My findings further suggest that in addition to immediate coping strategies adopted by the feminist actors described above, discussions over long-term strategizing against and surviving within the right-wing, anti-gender context became central for feminist conversations and debates. Two central areas of debate within feminist circles were trans inclusion and sex workers' rights. These debates were partly related to feminist conversations about these issues globally, but concerns over how feminist engagement with trans identity struggles or feminist support to sex workers could be harmful to Hungarian feminism dominated these conversations. Since the Hungarian right-wing anti-gender rhetoric accuses Hungarian feminism of importing foreign gender ideology and aiming to corrupt future generations of Hungarians with abstract ideas about socially-constructed gender, many feminist actors insisted on the importance of

refuting these accusations. Legitimizing Hungarian feminist work as locally-grounded, relevant and non-threatening was a central feminist aim within these debates. Separating feminist work from other socially-marginalized groups who were not supported by the Fidesz regime was often presented as a way of reaching this goal.

Based on these findings, I argue that the tensions brought to the Hungarian feminist movement by the right-wing, anti-gender climate contributed to the emergence and discursive dominance of what I call *anti-gender feminism* within Hungarian feminist circles as a strategy of overcoming the critiques of feminist work articulated within right-wing anti-gender discourse. Anti-gender feminism is grounded in a particular articulation of leftist perspectives and claims that the feminist movement must center on the needs of the majority of women and appeal to the sensibilities of “everyday people” in order to survive within a hostile climate. A “leftist perspective”, according to this discourse, allows for overcoming the failings of liberal feminist approaches, for example, West-imposed identarian struggles, which dismisses the structural reasons of inequalities affecting the wider public. In its desire to appeal to the wider masses, and operate without interference from the right-wing government, anti-gender feminist discourse distances itself from other marginalized struggles such as trans and sex-workers’ rights and racial justice.

I call this articulation of leftist feminism anti-gender because within the Hungarian context it is usually coupled with critiques of constructivist approaches to gender. To escape the right-wing accusation that gender destabilizes ‘natural’ differences between biological sexes, anti-gender feminist discourse insists on defining gender as a concept that should be applied to inequalities between women and men. Thus, like the right-wing, anti-gender discourse, anti-gender feminism is critical of understanding gender as a social construction, specifically

definitions of gender that do not align with normative body types. However, unlike right-wing anti-gender discourse, anti-gender feminism aims at dismantling restrictive gender roles and patriarchal structures which disadvantage women.

In addition, like right-wing anti-gender rhetoric, anti-gender feminism centers white, heterosexual women as a primary object of concern. It doesn't engage in direct racism but states that racial concerns are irrelevant for feminist work. By doing so anti-gender feminism silences the needs of ethno-racialized groups in Hungary, like Roma women. Like some of the right-wing anti-gender discourses (i.e. Graff & Korolczuk, 2021), anti-gender feminism is often based on anti-colonial sensibilities however obscures its reliance on dominant structures, such as cisgenderism, heterosexism and whiteness.

The findings of this research focus on the tensions and political discussions within the Hungarian feminism movement, but these observations can be relevant for understanding the impacts of right-wing and anti-gender politics on feminist movements elsewhere. Considering the similarities between right-wing use of anti-gender discourse in various places, anti-gender campaigns often pose similar challenges to local feminist actors. In Chapter 7, the conclusion of this dissertation, I discuss how critical examination of the strategies and arguments dominating Hungarian feminist discussions enables feminist communities to reflect on the unique challenges that anti-gender rhetoric poses. It also allows for analysing the effectiveness and shortcomings of various feminist responses to them. Anti-gender feminist discourse may seem successful in opposing the depictions of feminist actors as dangerous foreign agents, but it is also redefining and narrowing the boundaries of feminist work and separates feminists from other socially contested groups and struggles.

Theorizing Anti-Gender Campaigns and Discourse

Unpacking the specifics of the right-wing anti-gender discourse is central to understanding the unique challenges it poses for feminist actors and the coping strategies it requires. In this section of the introduction, I discuss major theoretical perspectives on anti-gender campaigns and movements, and scholarly discussion about the challenges it poses for feminist work. I do so to provide a theoretical roadmap for understanding the right-wing and anti-gender climate in Hungary and how it affects feminist scholars and activists. I intentionally focus on the writings from and about Eastern Europe because of the historical and political similarities among different Eastern European contexts. As previously mentioned, while there is a large body of scholarship dedicated to unpacking anti-gender movements, their origins and discourses, there is very little known about their impact on feminist politics and lives. Reviewing the existing literature on anti-gender campaigns reveals the importance of this dissertation to these theoretical discussions.

Central characteristics of anti-gender campaigns and movements that existing literature outlines are their transnational character, the newness of the discourse, and its origins. Depending on the local context, the composition of anti-gender movements, their use of anti-gender arguments as well as triggers that prompt their sudden popularity, differ. Scholars emphasize the need for a context-based and localized analysis of anti-gender movements in various countries. But they also agree that a national level of analysis is not sufficient for comprehending the transnational nature of these movements and the linkages and connections between the discursive or activist strategies they engage in (Graff et al., 2019; Korolczuk, 2014; Kováts, 2016b; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). For example, Kuhar and Paternotte (2017, 2) claim that anti-gender campaigns in different parts of Europe “bear a striking resemblance” as “they

share discourses, strategies and modes of action across borders; observe what each other is doing and are increasingly connected transnationally”.

In addition to emphasizing the transnational aspect of anti-gender campaigns, scholars warn against viewing the strengthening of anti-gender movements as a mere continuation of established conservative rhetoric or familiar forms of nationalist patriarchy (Kováts, 2020). Paternotte & Kuhar (2018) argue for the need to disentangle the anti-gender campaigns from other right-wing and nationalist-populist projects. They state that while anti-gender discourses build upon nationalist, masculinist and traditionalist frameworks “these campaigns form a specific type of conservative opposition to gender and sexual equality, which needs to be distinguished from other actors in Europe today” (Paternotte & Kuhar 2018, 7). The main characteristic of the anti-gender rhetoric is its attempt to demonize the concept of gender. Gender, for anti-gender movements is seen as “the root of their worries and the matrix of the reforms they want to oppose” (Paternotte & Kuhar 2018, 8). Gender in anti-gender rhetoric becomes an “empty signifier” which can bring together critiques of women’s rights, sexual rights, reproductive rights, trans rights or any gender or sexuality directed initiative . In addition, critiques of gender theory attack gender-related scholarship and especially post-structuralist theories as ideological bases of “anthropological revolution” because they question “sexual differences and gender complementarity” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, 5). Depicting gender as a primary threat to the very existence of societies, according to Korolczuk & Graff (2018) enables anti-gender movements to reach out to wider and not only conservative audiences as well as to organize in a systematic and strategic manner, often across national borders.

Paternotte & Kuhar (2018) track the origins of anti-gender discourse in Europe to the writings and the strategies of the Catholic church in the late 90s. They document that the notion

of “gender ideology” was shaped as the Vatican’s response to gender equality issues entering the human rights frameworks of the UN. Presenting gender-related scholarship and activism as an ideology threatening societal order was used as a strategy by the Catholic Church to maintain its insistence on the idea of complementarity between sexes and influence the conservative agenda over issues such as access to abortion, LGBT rights, motherhood etc. (Corredor, 2019; Kováts, 2016b; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) argue that gender ideology rhetoric propagated specific ideas about the meaning of gender in the process of repudiating the concept. Books about the dangers of gender theory for traditional families, for the future of the children or for the society, written by now famous anti-gender authors such as Dale O’Leary, Tony Anatrella or Gabriele Kuby (mostly from Western Europe and sometimes the US), were translated into multiple languages including Russian, Spanish, German, French, and even Hungarian. These authors, often closely connected with the Church or serving as clergy themselves, attended various right-wing or conservative forums in different countries (i.e World Congress of Families), inspiring local right-wing actors. However, according to Kuhar and Paternotte (2017), current national anti-gender mobilizations cannot be directly linked to the Vatican. The Catholic Church played a pivotal role in coining the concept of gender ideology and disseminating it. It has also offered space for discussing and sharing ideas between various conservative actors. But anti-gender discourse was taken up and utilized by various right-wing or conservative movements in unique ways and at various times. For example, Fidesz’s right-wing and nationalist government in Hungary can be described as patriarchal and anti-feminist since the party came in power in 2010. But the government started utilizing specific arguments characteristic to anti-gender discourse only later in 2017-18, during its attacks on the MA program in Gender Studies. During this time government speakers and

media started depicting the concept of gender as a “Trojan horse” aiming at destabilizing the “natural” division of society into men and women and, under the guise of equality, threatening the very survival of the Hungarian nation (Barát, 2022). The anti-gender argument, that gender is an ideology disguising itself as a scholarship, was particularly useful for challenging the status of gender studies as a legitimate academic discipline and eventually closing down gender studies programs.

While there is a consensus in the literature on anti-gender campaigns about their transnational character, specificity, and origin, scholars differ in how they conceptualize these movements and discourses. Some conceptualize anti-gender campaigns as a form of counter-movement against feminist and LGBTQ rights organizing (i.e. Corredor, 2019b; Roggeband, 2018). This approach aims at detailing the well-coordinated, thought-out and strategic nature of anti-gender organizing aiming to undermine ideological changes brought on by feminist and sexual rights organizing. Viewing right-wing anti-gender movements as counter-movements often requires the analysis of their origins and their spread, understanding their connections with various influential actors such as the Catholic Church or Russian political ideologists, who maintain their power through opposing social change.

Other scholars are more interested in explaining the popularity and massive public appeal of anti-gender discourse. For example, Eszter Kováts (2018) and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2014) are suspicious of simplifying anti-gender organizing by viewing it as a familiar patriarchal or conservative backlash. Kováts (2018) argues that these movements cannot be understood as conservative reactions to the already achieved or possible equality. Instead, she views the popularity of the right-wing and anti-gender sentiments as a sign of a larger systemic crisis of (neo)liberal democracies. In her article detailing the limits of human rights language for

describing the experiences of inequality in Hungary, Kováts (2019) explains that anti-gender movements do not fight against equality per se, but the ways in which feminist or other liberal actors define equality (through individualizing human rights language). A similar argument was put forward by Kováts & Poim (2015) in their famous publication which defined gender as a “symbolic glue”. In their understanding, gender became an umbrella term that can stand in for various contested issues attributed to liberal politics. They claim that the anxiety over gender stems from larger anxieties caused by frustrations with the neoliberal world order. Gender Ideology according to Petö (2015) has become a threatening term that represents various failures of liberal democracy, such as diminishing the economic, social or cultural securities or privileging the politics of representation and identity over material concerns. These works usually attribute the popularity of the right-wing anti-gender rhetoric to the instability of living in the neoliberal world. For example, Graff (2014, 434) argues that right-wing anti-gender movements draw their power “from collective anxieties produced by neoliberalism and globalization”. Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2021) argue that in Eastern Europe the key to the success of anti-gender campaigns is their effective use of anti-colonial rhetoric against neoliberal and neocolonial world order. Anti-gender campaigns couple the critique of “gender theory” with the critiques of liberal democracy, domination of liberal elites and the neo-colonial aspirations of the EU and the US. Kuhar and Patternote (2017) note that anti-gender activists will often reject local translations of the concept of gender in their speeches and insist on using the English-language term “gender”. By doing so, they “reinforce the impression that gender is imposed from above and from abroad” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, 14).

Scholars who look at how the right-wing anti-gender activists instrumentalize critiques of neoliberalism or colonialism also outline the racialized elements of anti-gender rhetoric. Kuhar

and Patternote (2018, 10) argue that the use of a self-victimization strategy presents anti-gender movements as “true defenders of oppressed people, of a majority who is silenced by powerful lobbies and elites”. Anti-gender actors thus present themselves as defenders of national interests against international others. In many cases, Corredor (2019, 628) argues, anti-gender rhetoric masks the “cultural hegemony and ideological imperialism” of right-wing forces who engage in it. It allows “the global right to present itself as a gatekeeper against foreign influence and as the real voice for women” (Corredor 2019, 628). In right-wing and anti-gender arguments in Europe, it is usually white national heterosexual families who are threatened by gender revolution. They need to be saved for the sake of propagating of a particular European nation (Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al., 2018). However, the same right-wing actors usually discuss migrant and refugee families in the context of overpopulation and taking over Europe’s “original population, identity, culture and language” (Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al., 2018, p.140). For example, according to Erzsébet Barát (2022, 173-174) Hungary’s right-wing anti-gender rhetoric creates false equivalences between “gender ideologues”, “Islamic migrants” or “Jewish Soros” by depicting them as various “others” attacking “us the nation”.

Anti-gender discourses, thus are usually part of the increase of broader right-wing and nationalist sentiments and help various right-wing social and political movements to claim the legitimacy of alternative models of political organization, often rooted in white supremacy and majoritarian interests. For example, anti-gender rhetoric was central to the notion of “illiberal democracy” developed and embraced by the Hungarian government (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018).¹ The idea of illiberal democracy opposes a liberal commitment to

¹ Illiberal democracy, was (in)famously described by Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán in 2014, as a political system which escapes the hegemony and the imperatives of the western liberal democracies, especially their insistence on equality and human rights, and instead builds a strong state serving national interests. While illiberal democracy relies on some democratic processes such elections or multi-party system, its central features are

human and especially minority rights, instead offering a model of a state which employs democratic tools but serves the interests of the “national community”, “the majority”, or the “common people”. Unsurprisingly, such a commitment to building “illiberal democracies” is simultaneously a heavily-racialized project. It defines national community in ethnically and racially exclusive terms and provokes anti-immigrant, anti-minority sentiments. Anti-gender rhetoric in this context could be seen as part of broader right-wing political or social discourses which gain their power not only by opposing “genderism” but also by inciting racial hatred and depicting immigrant or minority groups as threats to the interests of the “majority”.

Scholars investigating the emergence of anti-gender discourses across various social and political contexts often agree that these discourses have posed new and unique challenges for feminist scholars and activists. For example, Andrea Pető (2015, 130) argues that anti-gender campaigns are a qualitatively new phenomenon and therefore they require “new methods and frameworks of thinking for meaningful reactions by the progressive forces”. Becoming a central focus of popular and populist right-wing movements has increased public visibility of feminist efforts and thus the possibilities of being targeted and victimized by right-wing social groups or governments. Graff (2014, p.43) claims that even if feminist actors in Poland were rejected and demonized as national enemies, “naive idiots” or “baby-killers” since the late 80s, they were usually seen as unimportant and irrelevant for “real politics”. Despite the hostility, Graff (2014) argues, feminist activists and scholars continued their work by staying within their “cultural

racialized and majoritarian definitions on the nationhood (i.e. Hungary for Hungarians), hostility towards individual and minority rights as well as strong anti-immigrant sentiment (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018) On the one hand, the concept of illiberalism, was taken up by various right-wing and anti-gender movements and actors to describe their political commitments. On the other hand, “illiberal democracy”, or “illiberal transformations” are also used as analytic tools critiquing the increase of conservative political or social groups by scholarly community (Enyedi, 2016; Main, 2021; Sajó et al., 2021)

niche”, which included opening various gender studies programs, establishing feminist NGOs and fighting gender-based discrimination and violence. However, according to Petó, (2016, 297) becoming the main target of anti-gender and right-wing movements contributed to “paradoxical recognition” of feminist scholarship and activism, as they found themselves “in the midst of an open political struggle”. The centrality of “gender ideology” for the right-wing groups has posed a new challenge for feminist scholars and activists to redefine themselves not as marginalized actors but as central figures in debates about the socio-economic organization, equality and/or national sovereignty. This observation resonates with my research findings as well. As discussed in Chapter 4, the right-wing anti-gender context affected the social and political positioning of Hungarian feminist activists and academics. Their work started to be seen as opposed to the governmental ideologies, anti-national and a threat to their departments and universities.

Another challenge for feminists outlined in the literature on anti-gender campaigns is the exposure of their compliance with the global neoliberal order. For example, Kováts (2020) argues that in Eastern European states, gender-related scholarship and activism were firmly tied with the discourses of modernization and progress which went hand in hand with the inclusion of the whole region into the world capitalist order. Indeed, the institutionalization of gender studies as an academic discipline in the post-socialist region was part of a so-called “transition” process from socialist governance to democracy in the 90s (Barchunova, 2003; Cerwonka, 2008a; Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2003). Gender studies research centers or academic programs were also largely funded and supported by western developmental projects (Cerwonka, 2008a). Western commitment to supporting the emergence of Gender Studies in Eastern European states according to Zimmermann (2008), can be read as part of broader

developmental goals of institutionalizing core values of Western liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalist agenda in these states. In this historical context, according to Kováts (2020) right-wing negation of feminist activism and scholarship in Eastern Europe is often based on popular frustration with the never-materialized promises of economic prosperity associated with democratization and becoming part of the so-called developed world. This explains their popularity and requires new and self-critical analyses and strategies by feminist scholars and theorists (Kováts, 2018a, 2020, 2021; Pető, 2015). According to these texts, Eastern European feminist actors need to acknowledge the embeddedness of the politics of gender and sexual rights within a neoliberal global economy. They also need to be critical of their own role in supporting or reaffirming problematic narratives of progress and development. The discussions over the influence of western funding and moral support on feminist politics in Hungary were central for my participants as well. Negating the accusation that feminism is a western imposition, in the context where feminist actions were indeed largely supported by western institutions, such as the EU or Open Society foundation, was one of the main concerns of anti-gender feminism, as I define it.

Despite these justified critiques of feminist legacies, the politics and strategies proposed for challenging right-wing anti-gender rhetoric have been debated amongst feminist authors, especially in Eastern Europe. Barát (2022) brings examples of several anti-neoliberal and self-critical feminist texts from the Hungarian context and argues that these works often blame queer or post-structuralist authors for contributing to their own demise because they misconceptualize the concept of “gender” and turn it into an identitarian struggle. By doing so, these texts argue, post-structural theories of gender missed out on challenging the economic and structural violence embedded within neoliberalism. An example of such work is Eszter Kováts’s article on

the diverse meanings of gender. Kováts, (2018b) outlines four ways in which gender has been used in various contexts: as a synonym of sex, as a descriptor of women, as an analytical category to explain inequalities between sexes, and as a shifting identity. She argues that these varying meanings of gender have opened possibilities for the right-wing actors to demonize any kind of feminist work by associating it with so-called “genderqueer” activism in the Western states, which thinks of gender as a felt sense of identity that is detached from the biological sex. According to Barát (2022) such feminist work ignores the tensions and complexities of understanding the concept of gender in feminist and queer literature by lumping them together as “queerfeminism” and affiliating them with neoliberalism. In addition, she argues, such work prioritizes an essentialist understanding of gender in order to counter the right-wing’s anti-gender rhetoric and creates a false binary between identarian/cultural and structural/anti-neoliberal struggles. Barát’s observations closely align with my own findings. The discussions over defining gender because of how right-wing anti-gender discourse had demonized the word was important among the participants of this research too. I discuss them in detail in chapter 5.

These feminist conversations are important for conceptualizing this dissertation. They outline the specificity of the right-wing anti-gender discourse and the challenges it poses to feminist movements, in this case to the feminist movement in Hungary. Right-wing anti-gender campaigns are usually well-organized and have consistent discourse and arguments in their attacks on various feminist initiatives. They define gender in a way that presents feminist work as dangerous to the very survival of humankind and at the same time affiliates it with the nation’s enemies, such as “global liberal elites”. The pairing of the critique of the ideological and economic dominance of the Western world enables right-wing forces to associate gender with the injustices experienced by many people living at the margins of western neoliberal

world order and contributes to their success. In this context, feminist actors face multiple challenges, such as negotiating their increased visibility and demonization, negotiating their own legacies sometimes embedded into complicity with progressivist and neoliberal discourses, and finding ways of opposing right-wing and anti-gender discourses. Some strategies, in this context, for example, blaming loosely defined “queerfeminism” for the demise of feminism worldwide, places undue responsibility on feminist actors and dismisses the strategic and systematic nature of right-wing anti-gender strategies and their role in provoking anti-gender sentiments. The anti-gender and right-wing climate has been strong in many countries worldwide for many years and is still gaining strength in others. The theoretical conversations about its impacts on feminism require us to ask: How do feminist movements negotiate these complexities in their lived realities? How do they survive or oppose the accusations put forward by the right-wing anti-gender actors, especially when those actors become entrenched in state governments? How do they position themselves within their communities and avoid accusations of being ‘threats’ representing ‘outsider’ perspectives? What kind of activities do they engage in and what kinds of restrictions do they face?

However, despite scholarly interest in anti-gender movements and the challenges it poses for feminist actors, there is limited literature available about the impacts of anti-gender regimes on feminist movements and their strategies of resistance, especially in nations where right-wing and anti-gender discourses become entrenched in state policy. Notable exceptions to this general trend are Marianna Szczygielska's (2019) and Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk's (2021) studies of feminist politics within the anti-gender context of Poland. These works talk about the impacts of anti-gender politics on Polish feminists and about the new, flexible and less hierarchical strategies developed by the Polish feminist movement to counter it. They both focus

on the example of organizing mass-scale protests against the anti-abortion legislation initiated in the framework of broader anti-gender discourses in the country. While insightful, Polish women's unity against anti-abortion legislation is specific to the Polish context and a long history of women's organizing against restrictive abortion politics in the country. They demonstrate a good example of organizing against the anti-gender political climate but do not offer an analysis of how the specificities of the anti-gender context affect feminism outside the context of abortion. Another important example of the work discussing the impacts of the right-wing regime on the feminist movement is Kriszan and Sebestyen's (2019) research on Hungary. They offer an overview of the comprehensive legal and policy changes that affected feminist work in the country since 2010. They also argue, that in the context of governmental hostility and refusal to cooperate, feminist groups started to mobilize more grass-roots activities and build coalitions with a wide spectrum of civil society actors, including the right-wing ones. In addition, they note that newer and less organized feminist groups started to emerge in Hungarian feminist scene. However, despite a comprehensive review of right-wing policies and new feminist initiatives, this research doesn't address how Hungarian feminist actors understand and respond to specificities of anti-gender rhetoric and policies. Kriszan and Sebestyen's (2019) article is a good review of the impacts of the restrictive and right-wing climate in Hungary, but it doesn't adequately engage with the crucial element of right-wing attacks on feminist scholars – namely depicting gender as an ideology and a national threat. This dissertation intervenes here. My ethnographic data about Hungarian feminist actors living and working in a right-wing anti-gender climate outline changes that the feminist movement went through in an anti-gender and hostile political climate in the last 5-7 years. It examines the impacts of the Hungarian right-wing, anti-gender regime on various feminist academic and activist initiatives and analyzes

feminist conversations, responses, and actions within such a context. The ethnographic approach enables this dissertation not only to understand the restrictions that the feminist movement had to face in Hungary but also the changes the movement underwent to live and survive within a state-maintained anti-gender context.

The anti-gender regime has indeed limited the possibilities of doing feminist work in Hungary and more importantly, the need to avoid right-wing attacks has impacted the strategies and priorities of the feminist movements. To avoid the label of an outsider imposing liberal agenda onto the common people, the predominant feminist discourse in Hungary insists on the importance of prioritizing the needs of the “majority” of the women, of distancing feminists from other marginalized actors such as trans or sex-workers movements, and of appealing to the “everyday Hungarians”. I call this discourse anti-gender feminism. While anti-gender feminist discourse partially overlaps with the majoritarian perspective of the Hungarian state, it, however, cannot be equated with the discourses of the state-orchestrated and supported women’s rights groups or organizations in Hungary, often referred to as GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organization). According to my research, anti-gender feminist discourse emerged and gained discursive dominance in feminist groups that openly oppose the right-wing politics of the government and were often targeted by the government’s anti-gender measures. Anti-gender feminist discourse for them is a strategy of surviving the right-wing attacks on oppositional feminist politics and actors. However, in their attempt to rescue feminism from right-wing anti-gender hostility, they reproduce some of the same exclusions that Hungary’s nationalist-populist government advocates for.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter discusses the reasons for choosing feminist ethnography as a research methodology for this dissertation project. It details my choices of fieldsites, the process of conducting the research, participant contact procedures and choices, and the structure of the interviews. In the last section of the chapter, I discuss personal investments in this project and the challenges I faced because of them.

Chapter 3: Hungary – Social and Political Context

In this chapter, I talk about the broader right-wing and nationalist-populist context in Hungary within which anti-gender politics emerged and gained power. I discuss aspects of Hungary's political history and the present-day context in order to understand the right-wing and nationalist discourse of its current government. I continue by reviewing the major institutional, legal and political changes that have affected the lives of feminist scholars and activists in Hungary together with the anti-gender climate. I also talk about the specificities of anti-gender politics in Hungary. At the end of the chapter, I provide a brief description of Hungary's feminist scene since the early 90s in order to demonstrate how it became one of the main targets of anti-gender right wing discourse.

Chapter 4: Impacts of Anti-Gender Politics on Feminist Scholars and Activists

This chapter describes the major impacts of the right-wing regime on feminist academics and activists. I argue that the Fidesz government has affected the feminist movement in Hungary in significant ways. It has changed how feminist work was viewed within the mainstream public discourse and integrated into the domain of mainstream politics. This mobilized support from smaller liberal communities towards feminist causes but presented various financial, legal and

institutional challenges for continuing feminist work. The strategies for overcoming barriers to feminist work adopted by the participants included: continuing with one's work with the expectation of repercussions, self-censorship or resorting to what Spivak calls "strategic essentialism", or leaving the country.

Chapter 5: Feminist Debates and the Emergence of Anti-Gender Feminism

This chapter introduces more fundamental changes to feminist discourse within the right-wing anti-gender context. It demonstrates that discussions over successfully surviving in the right-wing and anti-gender climate have been central to feminist debates in Hungary. In this chapter, I introduce the emergence of what I call anti-gender feminism and argue that the right-wing anti-gender climate has created a fertile ground for the emergence of anti-gender feminism. Anti-gender feminism, grounded in Marxist-leftist perspectives, positions itself as a new and progressive perspective, capable of addressing the shortcomings of dominant liberal frameworks of feminist organizing and thus re-gaining legitimacy to feminist work. Central to anti-gender feminism is its goal of addressing the needs of the "majority of the women" and appealing to the sensibilities of the "average Hungarians". Liberal feminist frameworks, within this discourse, are depicted as importing/reproducing western paradigms, detached from the realities of the average Hungarian people and dominated by the identarian and culturalist claims of global liberal elites. Anti-gender feminist discourse promises to deflect the charges of the right-wing anti-gender discourses by defining gender as a descriptor of structural inequalities between (heterosexual) men and women and by addressing local (Hungarian) women's problems such as, for example, devaluation of their care work. By positioning itself as a new and radical perspective that replaces old and outdated feminist frameworks, anti-gender feminist discourse has become

dominant and a mainstream perspective amongst feminist circles in Hungary. However, I argue that by appealing to the needs of the majority and redefining feminism as a benign ideology, anti-gender feminism distances itself from other marginalized struggles such as trans and sex workers' rights and the struggles of the women of colour. This chapter reviews feminist discussions about trans inclusion and sex work/pornography in Hungary to demonstrate the central arguments of anti-gender feminist thinking.

Chapter 6: Anti-Gender Feminism and its Anti-colonial Sensibilities

This chapter continues engagement with anti-gender feminism by outlining similarities between some anti-gender feminist arguments and other anti-colonial feminist struggles, namely postcolonial and decolonial feminisms. Anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungary is often based on anti-colonial sensibilities. It is critical of western “support” to feminist causes and how this support is based on an underlying sense of western superiority. Anti-gender feminism also is critical of the ways in which developmental approaches to achieving gender equality in non-western, or not fully western places like Hungary, are usually connected to what it claims is the global neoliberal agenda. This is similar to arguments in classical post-colonial and decolonial literature, such as works of Mohanty (1997), Spivak, (1996) or Maese-Cohen (2010). Post-colonial and decolonial frameworks have also informed analysis of some Eastern European scholars who try to locate Eastern European states in the global hierarchies of power (i.e. Forrester et al., 2004; Koobak & Marling, 2014; Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). However, I argue that it would be a mistake to interpret the anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungary as aligned with postcolonial and decolonial feminist traditions, primarily because of its dismissal of race as relevant for feminist politics in Hungary and for its depictions of racialized struggles as

part of the western-imposed liberal feminist agenda. Furthermore, anti-gender feminist thought diverges from decolonial feminist tradition by its prioritizing of a few specific components of Western theoretical frameworks and practices, such as Marxist feminist perspectives from the US, while dismissing the voices of racialized feminist actors locally, such as voices of Roma Feminists. The chapter concludes by arguing that despite having some anti-colonial sensibilities, anti-gender feminisms cannot be viewed as grounded in post-colonial and/or decolonial feminist traditions. Instead, anti gender feminists, like right-wing nationalist actors, use anti-colonial arguments as a discursive strategy to justify their own political agenda which prioritizes the needs of white, cisgender and heterosexual working or middle-class women.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this chapter, I highlight the major arguments that emerged throughout the dissertation leading to the conclusion that the anti-gender discourse and politics employed by Hungary's right-wing actors contributed to the emergence and the dominance of anti-gender feminist politics in Hungary as a strategy for overcoming the critiques of feminist work articulated within right-wing anti-gender discourse. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of this research finding for feminist movements facing right-wing and anti-gender opposition transnationally.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology and the methods employed in this dissertation research as well as analyze some of the contradictions and conflicts I encountered as a feminist ethnographer. I firstly review some of the principles of feminist ethnography that guided my research and then discuss the research methods and the strategies used in my field. At the end, I offer a discussion of the conflict between my emotional and political commitments in feminist academia and activism. I engage with some critical texts about feminist ethnography which offer ways to deal with such conflict.

Feminist Ethnography as a Methodology

I was guided by the principles of feminist ethnography when planning, conducting and analyzing my research. I chose ethnography as a research methodology for this dissertation as I was interested in learning the real-life impacts of the state-sanctioned anti-gender right-wing political climate on feminist actors in Hungary and their ways of coping with it. Ethnographic research made it possible for me to have a temporary but in-depth access to the feminist field in the country. To interact with feminist actors directly, to participate in the discussions or political actions and thus to acquire a rich and first-hand knowledge about feminist lives and politics. It also allowed me to give voice to the concerns and the perspectives of Hungarian feminist scholars and academics. However, I was also aware of the need of conducting self-reflexive research, which took into consideration the power dynamics between the researcher and the research participants as well as hierarchies and silences within the research field. This is why I chose feminist ethnography as my primary methodology.

It is difficult to provide a single coherent definition of feminist ethnography. However, Davis and Craven (2016) while emphasizing the multiplicity of its definitions, outline some

common elements. Feminist ethnography is often thought of as a research method that stems from a feminist epistemology, is committed to social or political change, employs qualitative ethnographic methods and pays particular attention to power differences and inequalities within the research field as well as between the researcher and the research participants (Davis & Craven, 2016). Since its emergence as a field or a research methodology in the 1970s, feminist ethnography has been shaped and reshaped through feminist conversations about race (Crenshaw, 1990), class, queerness (Weiss, 2011), post-coloniality (Abu-Lughod, 1990, Mohanty, 1997), and more recently decoloniality (Fortier, 2017). Familiarity with these debates helped me develop research ethics and approaches based on various concerns around doing ethnography guided by feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial and anti-oppressive principles. In this section, I want to briefly outline them.

Cheryl Rodríguez (as cited in Davis & Craven, 2016, p.8) defines feminist ethnography as:

[A] method of writing, a method of telling a story, and a perspective that is grounded in a theory of feminist politics and a feminist reality. It is not just about women, of course, it is about gender and the ways in which gender intersects with race, class, experience, human rights, and all kinds of other social realities of our daily lives. It is a way of telling a story about gender and all of its intersections.

Rodríguez's definition served as an inspiration for me to think through, rethink and revise my research strategies, to reflect on the feminist politics informing my research, research questions and the approaches to doing fieldwork. It also motivated me to understand, interpret and analyze the experiences and politics of my research participants as they intersect with their social location, their racial status, or sexuality. Importantly, in this short quote Rodriguez outlines two central elements of feminist ethnography: commitment to intersectional analysis and commitment to feminist principles of social justice.

The importance of intersectionality for any ethnographic project cannot be understated. As Kimberly Crenshaw (1990) initially argued, blindness to the ways in which gender and race shaped the experiences of Black women's access and life in the shelters didn't allow for social analysis which truly comprehended these realities. Similarly, Davis (2014) argues that in ethnographic research, intersectional analyses, or introducing additional complexity to the research subject helps us gain additional critical insight and provide more interesting analysis. According to Davis (2014), helping researchers to identify their blind spots is one of the most important contributions of intersectionality to feminist research. Hence, my commitment to intersectionality for me was not only a gesture towards the politics of inclusivity but an imperative for conducting adequate research which could tell the stories of my participants truthfully. I wanted to be able to carry out research and analysis which was grounded in and informed by local context, research that understood how the relationship between local and transnational social and political contexts shaped the identities and the social positionings of my participants, and how in turn these social locations influenced feminist politics in Hungary.

Adopting an intersectional lens when doing research in a simultaneously white and nonhegemonic state like post-socialist Hungary or Eastern Europe was not easy: First, intersectional analysis often relies on racial configurations predominant in North America and sometimes Western Europe but it is not easy or always possible to translate them directly to other contexts. Additionally, race as an analytic category is often missing in Eastern European popular and scholarly discourses. The little existing scholarship on the subject often sees Eastern European whiteness as a form of racialized whiteness and ignores its role in Eastern Europe's claims to Europeanness and therefore to civilization and progress in opposition to the so-called 'Third World' (for example see Law & Zakharov, 2019). At the same time, it obscures the racial

configurations within East European states, such as the history and present of anti-Roma and anti-Jewish sentiments and more recently, Islamophobia. Understanding these specificities and paying attention to how the interplay between subalternity and whiteness informs not only nationalist or state politics in Hungary, but everyday life and the work of the local feminists as well, and therefore was central in developing an adequate analytical lens throughout this research. In addition to untangling and attending to the configurations of race, the intersectional approach informed my selection of the participants as well. Throughout the research, I was intentional about reaching out to diverse groups of activists and academics who could all be united under a broad feminist umbrella. The intersectional lens helped me incorporate the voices of lesbian and queer feminist groups, trans rights groups, Roma feminist scholars, and sex worker advocates in my research. The awareness that social class and position often impact one's lived experiences and perspectives led me to speak with feminist activists and academics at various stages of their careers and lives. These voices were central for critically analyzing the dominance of anti-gender feminist discourse within Hungarian feminist groups.

According to Naples (Naples, 2003, p.13) challenging “sexism, racism, colonialism, class, and other forms of inequalities in the research process” is central to feminist work, because feminist scholarship itself emerged out of the variety of social justice struggles. Misgav (2016) similarly argues that in addition to being sensitive towards particular identities and subjectivities, queer-feminist research should also be attentive to the struggles for social justice. Throughout my research, I was aware of the importance of feminist goals and strategies for survival in a hostile and repressive context that my respondents lived and worked in. Being sensitive and committed to similar feminist goals myself served as a bridge connecting me with the participants. However, in some cases our opinions about the means of achieving justice or the

very meaning of feminist struggle differed substantially. While these differences were quite unexpected for me at the beginning of the research, feminist theorists have been reflecting on the centrality of debate and conflict, often hostile ones, within feminist organizing and work for a long time (Fields, 2013; Taylor, 2009). The awareness of the longer history of feminist diversity, as well as ethnographic commitment to understanding and interpreting fieldwork realities within their own context, helped me navigate my fieldwork and its tensions.

Lastly, in addition to the commitment to intersectionality and social justice, what distinguishes feminist ethnography from other research methodologies is its desire for reflexivity. Such reflexivity often involves an active interrogation of the positionality of the researcher vis-a-vis research participants and critical exploration of the power dynamics between them. According to Davis (2014, p.18), a feminist claim that all knowledge is situated allows researchers to account for their own intersectional location. It also helps the exploration of the influence of the researchers' positionality on the fieldwork process and analysis (see also Misgav, 2016).

As Claire Hemmings famously argued “accounts of the past are always motivated accounts that tell us about the writer’s investments and interests” (Hemmings, 2007, p.72), and thus as a researcher I was committed to unpack these investments in relation to the story of feminism I wanted to tell. Understanding my own positionality, as someone born and raised in post-Soviet Georgia, a farther eastern part of Eastern Europe, as well as my quite western academic background, were both important factors for me in understanding how I was reading, relating to and sometimes silently debating with my research participants. In fact, unpacking the conflict between my emotional and academic investments in particular feminist politics and their divergence from fieldwork realities was one of the most important preconditions for me to be

able to write this dissertation. I offer the analyses of these reflections and the potentialities of resolving tensions at the end of this chapter.

Research Methods

General description of my research:

I conducted the research for this dissertation in Budapest, Hungary, in the months of November and December 2019. I lived in the city for 2 months in order to connect with the local feminist activists and academics, learn about their work and the challenges they experience daily within the increasingly hostile political context towards academic and activist work. In this two-month period, I was able to conduct in-person, in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 39 gender studies scholars and feminist activists. I conducted my last interview, later, in April of 2020 via Zoom. While in Budapest, I attended and participated in various feminist events and activities. This included the “16 Days Campaign against Gender-based Violence”, in the framework of which the “Silent Witnesses March” - one of the main feminist events in Hungary was held. I was lucky to be there for the first Trans Pride parade held on November 23rd as well.

The timeframe of my fieldwork was relatively short and just after my visit to the field at the end of 2019, the global Covid-19 pandemic started. However, I was able to maintain connections with my participants digitally. During my time in Budapest, I joined a few Hungarian feminist working groups as well as developed friendships with individuals on social media. Moreover, because part of my research focus is feminist academia and its response to anti-gender politics in Hungary, various online, academic or non-academic publications have been a tremendous source of information for me. These sources have helped me stay informed

about the main discussions and changes that have happened in the country since my fieldwork,² however, the analysis of this dissertation mainly relies on fieldwork notes and interviews.

The Interviews

The interview timeline ranged from 1 to 2 hours. They were arranged based on the convenience of location, privacy concerns and comfort of the participants. My interview guide was structured in three parts: (1) discussion of the participant's work and their path to feminism; (2) discussion of the political and social context in Hungary during the Fidesz government (last 10 years), including anti-gender campaigns and policies adopted by the government. The influence of the hostile climate on the participant's personal as well as professional life; (3) discussion of feminist academia and activism in Hungary, to identify main areas/topics of feminist concerns, conceptualize the history of feminist movements within the country and to analyze varieties of feminist agendas and goals.

For ethnographic research, it is crucial to be truthful to the fieldwork realities instead of imposing the researcher's preconceived categories (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Weiss, 2011). Hence, I kept my interviews as open as possible. While I did use the interview guide and its questions to streamline the interview process and keep it focused, I did not conduct interviews in a neatly structured manner. I let the discussion flow freely between me and the participant in order to give them an opportunity to focus on themes and areas that were most interesting and important to them. This also enabled me to incorporate themes and discussions within my research that were not initially a part of the interview questions. For example, the conflicts and debates among

² Two main reasons why I prioritized analyzing interview material over the analysis of the online discussions are: 1) Many of the online discussions on social media were happening in closed groups where my status as a researcher was not clearly outlined. I did not want to make these discussions public for ethical reasons. 2) Online conversations were usually in Hungarian language. I could understand and follow them through translation tools online, but I did not want to misinterpret the complexities of the language or make transnational mistakes in the dissertation.

feminist activists and movements during the last five years turned out to be one of the central concerns and area of interest for most of my participants. The divisions of feminist activists and groups based on their leftist or liberal political stance, their position towards trans equality or sex work, towards so-called 'western feminist academia' and its relation to Hungarian feminist work were the topics that emerged gradually throughout the field. I did not anticipate such divisions to be central to how the local actors conceptualize the political context in Hungary, how they understand the reasons for the shift towards the right-wing politics or how they strategize for surviving the regime and planning future feminist action. Openness to hearing the participants and following their lead helped me identify new and crucial themes for this research, namely the discussion of what changes the new anti-gender movements and social climate bring for feminist academic and activist fields or how they re-structure feminist movements by inciting internal conflict and debate.

This research received ethics approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee at York University's Ethics Review Board, which conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. All of the interviews I conducted were audio-recorded and transcribed later. The participants signed informed consent forms, which discussed the purpose of the research and the measures taken for ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Confidentiality and anonymity were important concerns for many participants, primarily because of the repressive political climate in the country and the fear of institutional or media response if their identity got revealed. The ideological differences with other feminist groups and the fear of being criticized for one's opinion were also often cited as a reason for wanting to remain anonymous, which again was a good indication of how internal conflicts and divisions have affected the movement in the last few years and how deeply personally they were felt.

Despite this, a few respondents were neutral about revealing their identity and didn't mind their opinions being attributed to them. Some of them, however, changed their position throughout the interview process, as they realized they didn't want the opinions they expressed to become public knowledge. Only one participant explicitly asked me to cite her name in the dissertation. In order to avoid self-censorship on the part of the majority of the participants, I reassured them that their names would be changed in the dissertation and the details of their institutional or other kinds of affiliations would not be revealed. Thus, the names of the participants in this dissertation are pseudonyms and Appendix 1 provides only short biographical information about them without exposing details of their workplace, specific research subject, etc.

All thirty-nine interviews for this research have been transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using MAXQDA software. The major discussion points were identified during the initial open coding process. Later, I worked on finding connections and relationships between these central topics and organized them under wider thematic categories.

The Participants

Considering that the feminist activist and academic circles in Hungary are relatively small, I was lucky to be able to connect with and have a conversation with most of the prominent academics as well as activist groups. While two months is barely enough time to establish connections and plan meetings with almost forty participants, I had a significant advantage in this process. During my fieldwork to Budapest, I also had a visiting fellowship at ELTE University, and I was lucky to be supervised by Aniko Gregor, Assistant Professor in social sciences and at that time a coordinator of the MA program in Gender Studies at the university. Professor Gregor, while giving me complete autonomy to conduct my research, helped me map out key feminist groups and actors for my fieldwork and facilitated many of my first interactions

with the participants. With her help, I was able to connect with a number of interviewees inside and outside academia. Professor Gregor's help was also supplemented by my own knowledge of some aspects of Hungarian feminist scene. I lived, studied and worked in Budapest for two years between 2009 and 2012, therefore I still had friends as well as teachers living and working in the city. Importantly, during my time in Budapest I was doing my MA in Gender Studies at Central European University and later worked at a Human Rights organization there, hence my connections were already related to my current research. My friends, acquaintances and teachers helped me feel welcome, discussed my research and recent political changes with me and supported me in connecting with wider feminist circles. In addition, through them as well as because of my interest over the years, I was quite aware of the political and social situation in the country which helped to engage in conversations easily, connect better and be seen as someone relatable and knowledgeable of the local context.

After the initial mapping of the field and the first few interviews, I used a more traditional snowball sampling method to reach out to the participants whom I may not have known about at the beginning of my fieldwork. I wanted to learn about as many and diverse perspectives and experiences as my research framework and timeline allowed. I met with academics working in the Gender Studies field in five different universities in Hungary, two of which are outside Budapest. These were people who started and still work at the most important research and academic programs relating to gender, masculinity or women's studies in their institutions. I am not naming the institutions or the programs out of concern for anonymity. Hungarian feminist academia is quite small, hence people are easily identifiable through their professional affiliations. I met with feminist activists who are in the leading positions at Hungary's largest, oldest and most influential feminist organizations. I met with the activists

who have been in the movement since early 90s, since the regime change and the inception of contemporary feminist movement in the country. They shared their memories of the beginning of the movement and how it has changed over years. I also interviewed various groups from the so called 'younger generation' of feminists. These were formal or informal groups, organizing particular campaigns or protests, working on academic publications and theorization of Hungary's social, political or economic situation. It's noteworthy that quite a large number among the members of these newer groups have received some kind of academic training in gender studies. Some graduated from Central European University's gender studies MA or PhD programs, others were still studying at the now closed gender studies program at ELTE university. Some had taken courses in gender studies offered by a variety of institutions. It was interesting for me to see the transfer of knowledge among the feminist generations, the connectedness of academic and activist work and the impact of the last 30 years of feminist organizing.

Hungary is quite an ethnically homogenous country and feminist circles, dominant or smaller groups, reflect this. Most of my research participants were ethnically Hungarian and white, highly educated and employed. Commitment to voicing marginalized and diverse voices is an important principle for feminist ethnography. However, the voices of underrepresented groups in Hungary, like Roma women, were not immediately visible during my research. In such situations, according to Rosemarie A Roberts, feminist scholars should "look for and cite those who continue to be marginalized, [and to acknowledge] their important contributions to our collective knowledge base" (As cited in Davis & Craven, 2016, p.12). I thus reached out to the members of marginalized communities myself. I met with Roma Feminist academics and activists, to understand their experiences of being part of a feminist movement in Hungary.

While there are very few people who work specifically on Roma women's issues within a larger Hungarian feminist scene, these Roma feminist academics have created incredible political consciousness and done impressive theoretical work for understanding and conceptualizing Roma experiences.

While the initial focus of the research was on the activists and academics who would loosely identify as feminist, I also reached out to LGBTQ as well as trans activists to supplement the data collected. The relationship between feminist and LGBTQ activists in Hungary was a topic that came up in great majority of the interviews and I wanted to hear about this relationship from the LGBTQ and trans individuals. I did not have a "balanced sample" – which would mean that I would interview an equal number of diverse actors, so the focus of my research remained on feminist groups. However, I did make sure that I met and talked with the representatives of the major LGBTQ, LBT and Trans organizations. Their insights were crucial in analyzing the emergence of the anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungarian feminism. Predictably, The Hungarian LBT movement is closely connected with feminist academic and activist circles in Hungary, and LGBTQ movements seem to be also accepted despite a few tensions. The Trans movement, however, seems to be the target of feminist critique most intensely, making it hard to link and unpack shared barriers that both movements face.

Finally, as I discuss in Chapter 4, various state-supported women's organizations and groups have emerged in Hungary in recent years. The government usually channels mostly EU funds directed to empowering civil society and gender equality in Hungary towards these so-called NGOs and deprives oppositional feminist organizations and groups of funding. As the goal of this research was to understand the struggles of feminist groups in a state-orchestrated, anti-gender context, I did not interview any of the state-affiliated groups. All the participants of

this research were critical of the right-wing and nationalist-populist politics of the Hungarian government and viewed themselves as targets of its anti-gender politics.

Field, Language, Location

The main challenge of doing fieldwork in Hungary was my limitations with the Hungarian language. As I don't speak Hungarian, it was harder for me to engage with the social life of feminist groups fully. Despite, I was lucky to be in Budapest during one of the major feminist events, "16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence". Feminist groups organized many smaller and larger scale events during this time – and most importantly they organized an annual "Silent Witnesses" march to commemorate the victims of domestic violence. Fighting against domestic violence is also one of the central foci of major feminist organizations in general, therefore this campaign has a special significance for understanding the feminist movements and their work in the country. While I was sad to miss a few organized talks and discussions during this campaign, I was lucky that many of the events had translation available for non-native speakers. I was also fortunate to witness and attend the first trans pride march organized by a new trans rights organization Prizsma on the same day as the Silent Witness's March. The participants of both of these important events were kind enough to help me understand the context and the key messages of the marches, as well as open up about their experiences and reasons for participation. Central European University, my alma-mater, was also still located in Hungary in 2019, right before its move to Vienna, Austria in 2020 due to political repressions by the Hungarian Government. CEU is an American institution therefore it provided a venue for me to attend various academic and activist events organized in English language and attended by Hungarian or international speakers.

Language was not a barrier for conducting the interviews. All of the participants were comfortable speaking and expressing themselves in English. This was partially a result of most of my participants having a relatively privileged social position. They all had received higher education and had worked on academic and activist projects both in Hungarian and English languages. Such high level of comprehension of English is typical in Eastern European activist and academic groups, due to the requirements of the globalized academia as well as English being the main communication language for various transnational human rights and feminist organizations and foundations. In addition, higher education is more widely accessible in many post-socialist countries compared to North America.

My fieldwork was mostly limited to Budapest, the capital of Hungary. I did travel to a university in a smaller town in northwest Hungary, where faculty engaging with the concept of gender in their teaching had faced multiple challenges from the students as well as the administration. I also had a chance to talk to faculty and a student from another University, in a small town outside the capital when they were in Budapest. But I did not get the opportunity to travel around Hungary more due to the limited timeframe of the research. However, it's important to mention that most academic programs working in the field of gender as well as the largest nationwide feminist organizations are concentrated in Budapest, giving me a good sense of the situation feminist scholars and activists face in Hungary.

Emotions, Power and Conflict in Research – Reflections

In the last part of my methodology chapter, I want to reflect on the emotional and political turmoil that I experienced through the fieldwork. I want to do so because critically interrogating feelings, scholarly commitments or feminist sentiments that I carried with me while doing fieldwork was fundamental for my ability to create a truthful and open description and

analysis of my fieldwork data for this dissertation. I had to acknowledge that I was deeply emotionally affected by the hardship that feminist movements faced in Fidesz's regime, but I also was personally invested in finding possibilities of feminist strategizing that could survive and influence the context. This helped me relate with my research participants better and have passionate and in-depth discussions with them. However, the emotional investment in the field as well as into feminist politics in general, also made me particularly sensitive towards hearing feminist politics and perspectives that significantly diverged from mine.

“What do you do when your feminist politics clash with your empirical findings? - according to Avishai, Gerber and Randles (2012, p.395), this rarely asked question is central to feminist research. They argue that the tension between our political positionalities, our social justice goals and our academic obligation of producing reliable scholarship “informs all progressive social change research” (p.395). And interrogating this tension is one way of going beyond the impasse that it creates. Moreover, as Fields (2013) demonstrates, unpacking our emotional attachments to feminist goals is equally as important as understanding our politics. Hence in this section, I will first discuss my emotional and personal investments towards Budapest and feminist projects and then reflect on my social or academic positionalities. I hope that this interrogation will illuminate the tensions and controversies that inform this dissertation and gesture towards the ways of coping with them.

Budapest was the city where I first learned about feminist and queer activism and academia. Living in the city while I was doing my Masters in Gender Studies at Central European University in 2009-2010, was a deeply transformational and formative experience for me. I was 21 and it was the longest period I had spent away from my birth country, Georgia. Budapest to me was a city of wonder, where I learnt about feminism, queerness, attended my

first ever pride parade, and made friends who shaped my heart and mind forever. During my research, exactly ten years after I initially stepped foot in the city, it had changed dramatically and was going to change even more. Central European University had been expelled from Hungary by Fidesz's government and was in the process of uprooting itself and moving to Vienna. The beautiful buildings of the school located in the center of Budapest, once filled with students from all over the world, were now empty. The events organized about the restrictions to academic freedom in Hungary, anti-gender movements, and human rights all carried an unarticulated sense of sadness. It was difficult for me to see the city transformed, my favorite queer-supportive places now closed or turned into upscale tourist bars. I took pictures of the remains of the bar where we organized performances like "Coming Out Monologues" and the more famous "Vagina Monologues". I took pictures of the sign – the Department of Gender Studies --at my university which would soon be taken down. I was trying to preserve memories that were still there but were being dismantled right in front of my eyes. I had to acknowledge that I cared deeply about this place, this city. I cared deeply that the possibilities it offered me a few years ago and in my utopic imagination could offer to so many others, were now vanishing. Seeing the extent to which local feminist colleagues had been targeted and demonized, attacked personally, cut off from funding, research, or other opportunities was one of the clearest signs of my imaginary world collapsing.

I felt troubled by how quickly social and political context can shift around us. Anti-gender and right-wing movements have been organizing and mobilizing transnationally, and very visibly in Eastern Europe in the last ten years. In Hungary they managed to gain governmental power and implement their politics practically, by changing the constitution, banning gender studies, and adopting laws prohibiting queer self-expression. They managed to transform the

state in 10 years to what they call the “illiberal democracy”. This set a dangerous example and served as a warning for those of us who live in places where similar politics are on the rise, including Georgia. Having experienced the painful reality of doing activist work in a hostile context and having been a target of various right-wing groups, internet trolls or misinformation pages myself while I was involved in queer activism in Georgia, I somewhat identified with Hungarian feminist groups. Despite important differences between Georgian and Hungarian contexts, the work of homophobic, right-wing or anti-gender movements are quite similar in their nature and the impact they have on those they target. For me, learning about the ways in which feminist movements can re-strategize and organize in such contexts was important as a lesson from which we can all learn. It could be a way for feminist and queer movements to create regional or transnational alliances for coping with the changing reality. These identifications and personal investments in the research topic were partially helpful for me. They let me relate with my research participants on a deeper level. Not only did I feel connected to them, but they found it easier to talk to and trust me, because I was able to understand the Eastern European context and had gone through similar experiences myself. However, they were also a burden to my ability to stay open-minded when our positions and perspectives diverged significantly. I had to then remind myself of the ethnographic principles of staying true to the field realities despite my pre-existing opinions or values.

According to Avishai et al. (2012), the gap between a researcher’s commitment to feminist goals and their fieldwork realities can be bridged by reflexive analyses. And, as already mentioned, reflexivity is also one of the central principles of feminist ethnography. However, most often, self-reflexivity in feminist research is understood as a commitment to unpacking the researcher’s positionality, their position vis-à-vis research participants. This usually means

paying particular attention to various layers of the researchers' identity and their relationship with the community they study (Craven, 2016). However, as for Avishai et al. (2012) a mere focus on one's social identities can obscure wider and more systematic processes that also shape feminist ethnography. Together with interrogating one's social location, they emphasize the need of engaging with the so-called "institutional reflexivity". Institutional reflexivity, according to them is a:

Critical reflection on established feminist knowledge, the institutional conditions under which feminist knowledge is produced, the ways it shapes theory and analysis, and the unspoken pressures it generates for feminist researchers' work to contribute to broadly defined feminist goals of promoting social justice (Avishai et al., 2012, p.397)

Thus, it's not enough for feminist researchers to list their multiple identities and outline the privileges and vulnerabilities they generate. It is also important for us to understand the institutional, scholarly and epistemological commitments we carry with us when engaging with our research sites.

This distinction was helpful for me to reflect on my own positioning towards my research field. As someone who grew up in an impoverished middle-class family in post-soviet, post-war and a non-EU Eastern European state, I did not feel particularly privileged in relation to my research participants. The majority of them like me were middle-class, highly-educated, multi-lingual, working professionals. I understood that my being a cis-gender, feminist identified, Eastern European woman indeed gave me a broad access to conducting my research. Being seen as relatable and trustworthy, someone who can potentially relate to the Hungarian context and local feminist struggles better than "a westerner". Thus my personal identities did serve to my advantage in doing the fieldwork, but it did not necessarily put me in a hierarchical social positioning in relation to my research community. However, what I felt contributed to my feeling

of being an outsider despite the existing connections, was my western academic training and experience.

The institutions where we train academically or where we plan and carry out our studies, can produce their own interpretative frameworks or orthodoxies that influence how we see, understand and analyze our research (Avishai et al., 2012). Institutional reflexivity requires critical scrutiny of our methodological and epistemological stances (Fields, 2013). Thus, reflecting on my institutional, theoretical or epistemological commitments in relation to my research was central for me in unpacking the tension between my feminist and social justice aspirations and the feminist politics predominant in the field.

While my introduction to feminist theories and practice started in Budapest Hungary, it also started in an American institution located there. I continued my feminist academic journey, here at York University six years after and moved to Toronto. Thus, my feminist politics and scholarship are grounded in western academic spaces. They are also informed and influenced by my involvement in queer, LGBT and feminist activist struggles in Georgia. I see feminist and queer struggles as inherently entangled and connected despite differences and conflicts, powers and privileges differently distributed within and between the groups. My theoretical training in feminism and queer theory was grounded in post-structural and queer insights and deconstructive approaches. I was trained to be sceptical of the claims of coherent identities, and the universality of the concepts such as patriarchy or homophobia. The insights of critical race, post-colonial and transnational feminist writers as well as of queer authors of colour have been especially important for my understanding of the ways in which axes of gender, race, sexuality, social class or ethnicity intersect and that the analyses of these intersections need to be embedded in a rigorous understanding of cultural, political, social or economic contexts and their transnational

connections. My commitment to social justice movements has made me attuned to the omissions that are often created within feminist and queer discourses which require constant revisions and critical analysis of the strategies and goals of various movements. Importantly for this research, I see gender as well as sex as a social construct mapped onto what Gayle Rubin (2012) calls ‘sex/gender system’ or what Judith Butler (2008) calls the ‘heterosexual matrix’. Hence, for me, feminist and trans theories and movements, despite significant differences, have a lot in common, especially their interest in deconstructing the essentialist understandings of sex and unproblematic mapping of gender onto the sexed bodies.

However, despite being trained in western feminist thought, including critical perspectives, my scholarly interest and activist experience has always been grounded in Eastern European realities. Therefore, I thought that my ability to comprehend general specificities of the regional context, including local adaptations of post- and decolonial perspectives, and my commitment to learning more about the local politics and its nuances would help me smoothly employ my theoretical roots with the research findings.

It did not turn out to be the case. When I planned my research with feminist academics and activists in Hungary, I wanted to understand how we as feminists can conceptualize the right-wing trend apparent in Eastern Europe and globally and how, based on the contextual and critical analyzes, we can cope with the changing political climate and survive within it. Because of our shared feminist and social justice goals, I naively did not expect large differences in our opinions. I was of course aware of the fact that feminist politics differ and clash within feminist movements and groups, but I was still not prepared to cope with the extremity of these differences. It was hard for me to reconcile with anti-sex work, anti-trans and sometimes violently transphobic sentiments I encountered in the field. I was not ready to engage in the

discussions over intersectionality being seen as a “Victimhood Olympics” not by the right-wing but by the feminist activists. I had not prepared for understanding the distaste towards deconstructivist feminist or queer theorizing and the centring of the ‘average woman’s experience’ as an ultimate subject for a feminist struggle. I felt quite vulnerable during some interviews and often had to recentre myself or take a break. Such emotional turmoil, unsurprisingly, made it harder to establish clear boundaries between my politics as a researcher and as a feminist.

While fully untangling these boundaries or resolving the conflict between my political and academic goals may not be possible, feminist ethnographic principles urge us as researchers to stay open and tend to this conflict. Acknowledgement and exploration of such conflicts and ambivalences in research according to Fields (2013), can itself be constitutive of feminist ethnography. And according to Weiss (2011, p. 662), “broader consideration of how we see what we name, how we try to know what we have already demarcated” should drive our projects. Following Mohanty’s suggestion that “cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes (As cited in Davis & Craven, 2016, p.26), in this dissertation I was committed to voicing the local perspectives and their transnational connections and specificities grounded in the context of doing work in post-socialist Hungary.

While articulating the disappointments and difficulties I had to face as a feminist ethnographer, and while acknowledging my partially subjective reading of the field realities, it was my responsibility to engage with my research findings openly and provide rich descriptions of the contradictions and discussions within feminist activist and academic fields. Feminist ethnographers are often burdened by the desire of advancing feminist vision and as Fields

argues, it's important that we remain critically reflexive of such desires. We should work within and against a state of "ambivalent observance" and untangle our "disappointments and complicities" this way (2013, p.499). Adopting a position of an "ambivalent observer" was crucial for me to be able to write this dissertation. The position enabled me to truthfully document my fieldwork findings without continuously debating them. Critically interrogating my emotional investments in the fieldwork at every step of analysis helped me understand their impacts on my writing process and, as Field suggests, work against them, by staying attentive to other opinions and perspectives and their emotional reasons. Thus working in a state of ambivalent observance enabled me to document voices and perspectives which I may disagree with, but I can understand the historical, political, social and emotional reasons for their emergence. I think understanding the diversity of feminist positions, within their own political context is central to building feminist solidarities as well as informed feminist critique. This kind of research enables us to comprehend the reasoning behind particular feminist positionalities instead of labelling them hateful or phobic. Thus, it enables us to foster dialogue instead of antagonizing sides.

Chapter 3: Hungary - Social and Political Context for Feminist Actors

This dissertation demonstrates that right-wing anti-gender discourse contributed to the emergence of what I call anti-gender feminism as a strategy to counter governmental anti-gender rhetoric. In this chapter, I provide a broader review of the Hungarian social and political contexts in order to locate and better explain the anti-gender rhetoric of the government and how it relates to feminism. I engage with the existing scholarship about Hungary's turn to the right and its current political regime as well as the scholarship about anti-gender politics of the Hungarian state. The literature focusing on social and political transformations that took place in Hungary in the last decade usually dismisses or pays little attention to gendered aspects of these changes. Existing feminist scholarship about the anti-gender politics of the Hungarian state often doesn't dedicate enough space to detailing the nationalistic and populist underpinnings of anti-gender politics. In this chapter, I demonstrate that recent anti-gender rhetoric and politics are one part of and deeply connected with Hungary's right-wing governance. They are entangled with the nationalist and populist ideology of the Hungarian government and are reinforced by policies enabled by systemic and restrictive legal and political changes that the country underwent within the last 12 years. The contemporary feminist movement in Hungary, which emerged after the 1989 transformations, has to devise its survival strategies in relation to the repressive, populist and nationalistic anti-gender climate and is often vulnerable to its critique. It is in this context of vulnerability that anti-gender feminist discourse gained discursive dominance amongst Hungarian feminist circles.

In what follows, I discuss the government's populist-nationalist rhetoric and its historical bases in order to contextualize the arguments used against so-called "gender ideology" as a foreign threat to the Hungarian national future. I review state campaigns against civil society and

its foreign funders to detail the political obstacles faced by the feminist activists in the country. I also discuss the changes administered in the higher education system which together with the right-wing anti-gender climate impact feminist scholars. At the end of the chapter, I discuss the specifics of the anti-gender politics of the Hungarian state and how it relates to the history and the politics of the feminist movement in the country.

[Hungarian nationalism Past and Present - Connections](#)

In September 2015, when pictures of hundreds of Syrian refugees camped in front of Keleti train station in Budapest flooded the internet, Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, declared a "state of migration emergency". However, the terms 'emergency' and 'crisis', didn't refer to the humanitarian challenge facing Europe, but instead to the alleged threat of Muslim invasion (Fekete, 2016). In various media appearances and political speeches, Orbán insisted that the supposedly inviting immigration policies of European countries were a 'madness' threatening the very existence of Europe, its Christian values, and its wealth (Traynor, 2015). According to Orbán, Hungary needed to resist the pressure of 'political correctness' and defend not only itself but also Europe from becoming a "minority interest in its own continent" (Kounalakis, 2015). He claimed that Hungarians had the right and the obligation to "defend [their] culture, language, and values" (Fekete, 2016, 41). The rhetoric was immediately followed by disturbingly efficient political and legal action by the Hungarian government. It refused to fulfil Hungary's obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and instead invested 100 million Euros for building a wire fence at the Hungarian border with Serbia, where most refugees entered Hungary from. It mobilized heavy military forces for protecting the border, changed legal procedures for asylum seekers, and carried out a massive and state-funded, anti-refugee billboard campaign.

Hungary's handling of the migration crisis - its insistence on defending European and Christian values while resisting legal obligations under EU membership, its depiction of European liberalism as a self-destructive madness and empty political correctness, its mobilization of national sentiments over-protecting one's culture and language, and its definition of being Hungarian and European in opposition to the 'Muslim world' - is a good illustration of the main tenets of Orbán's "illiberal democracy", discussed in Chapter 1. Later in 2018, Orbán supplemented the concept of illiberal democracy with Christian democracy, to point out the traditionalist aspects of his governance. It was the migration crisis that drew large scale international attention and critiques towards Hungary, but the country had been going through major political, social, and ideological changes since 2010, when the right-wing political party, Fidesz, the Alliance of Young Democrats, won the national elections and came to power with a constitutional majority. Since 2010, Fidesz has modified the Hungarian constitution several times, changed the election system to benefit the ruling party (hence ensuring re-election in 2014, 2018 and in 2022), weakened the country's court system, dismantled public defender's office, monopolized media, restricted academic and artistic freedoms, and became infamous for its racist, sexist, anti-equality rhetoric and practice. Changes that Hungary underwent in the last 12 years are often rightfully described as democratic backsliding, anti-democratic, illiberal, authoritarian, autocratic, populist-nationalist, or even as a mafia state in various publications (Bokros, 2021; Bordas, 2021; Csigó & Merkovity, 2016; Fekete, 2016; Kriszan & Roggeband, 2019; Nyssönen & Metsälä, 2021; Scheiring & Szombati, 2020).

To understand the conditions that led to Fidesz's election and made his populist-nationalist rhetoric so powerful, it's important to outline major historical processes that contributed to shaping Hungary's national project throughout the 20th century. Hungary is a

small country in Eastern Europe and a descendant of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The roots of the contemporary Hungarian national project, a conception of a nation-state that Fidesz often relies on, can be found in the brief period between the two world wars. Between 1919-1944, Hungary was ruled by a governor, Miklós Horthy. Horthy's rule is often referred to as "Horthy's regime" or "Horthy's system" in contemporary literature because of its autocratic, authoritarian, and nationalist nature (Bordas, 2021; Bozóki, 2016; Humán Platform, 2020). Horthy's regime and its support were built on the hope of revising the Treaty of Trianon. The treaty signed in Paris in 1920 concluded World War I, causing Hungary to give up some of its pre-war territories to neighbouring states. Another important aspect of Horthy's era was opposing Bolshevism and spreading Christian national ideas (Deak, 1992). Thus, the key characteristics of Horthy's regime were: promoting social unity against the constructed enemies and "foreign elements" such as communists and the Jews; emphasizing the ancient traditions, lifestyle, and the origins of Hungarians; and at the same time depicting Hungary as a victim of unfair international powers (Humán Platform, 2020; Molnár, 2021). Horthy's promotion of the Christian national idea was rooted in the anti-Semitism of the regime during the interwar period (Fekete, 2016) and was often supplemented by anti-Jewish regulations, such as restricting access to higher education for Hungarian Jews. In the mid-1930s, Hungary allied with Germany and fought on its side during World War II, resulting not only in massive death and exile of Hungarian Jews but other racial minorities as well, such as Roma people (Baumgartner, n.d.). To summarize, the national or state project crafted through Horthy's era had a strong ethnic-nationalist aspect, manifested in anti-Semitic and anti-Roma sentiments, who until today are the largest ethno-racialized communities in the country. At the same time, it relied on defining Hungarianness through belonging to Christian and white Europe. Despite these dark sides of the Horthy era in Hungarian history, he

has been cited as an “exceptional statesman” and a model politician by prime minister Viktor Orbán in his political speeches (Humán Platform, 2020, 27), and has become one of the celebrated figures among various nationalist and far-right groups in the country.

A brief period of independence after World War II in Hungary was followed by a Soviet takeover in 1956. The Soviet period in Hungary is often viewed as a derailing of the country’s European path and the suppression of its sovereignty and national spirit. This is why, as David Chioni Moore (2001) claims, the collapse of the Soviet Union was often perceived as decolonization among many eastern European countries and Hungary is no exception. Claiming its “rightful place” among other European nations became “a key goal” of post-socialist Hungary since the 90s (Johnson & Barnes, 2015, 542). The process of integrating post-socialist states into liberal democratic and capitalist order, often described as “transition” or “democratization” in post-Soviet literature, was considerably smoother and painless in Hungary than in many other Eastern European states. Hungary is often considered a “star performer” of the transition (Bokros, 2021, 25). It joined NATO in 1999 and was one of the first post-Socialist countries to become an EU member state in 2004. While some scholars argue that the first decade of transition was not only politically but also economically quite successful (Borkos, 2021), others describe Hungary’s integration into the global market economy as a “shock treatment” (Fekete, 2016). Hungary may have done better than its counterparts in the region economically, but the de-industrialization and structural changes to the economy resulted in large-scale unemployment and economic downfall (Fekete, 2016).

Scholars, however, agree that Hungary’s economic situation was becoming more and more precarious since the mid-2000s due to the extreme liberalization of the country’s economic policies, debt administration in foreign currency, and the government’s failed attempts to sustain

the local economy (Bokros, 2021; Scheiring & Szombati, 2020). This is when the expectations of prosperity and economic well-being, promised by Hungary's integration with the EU started to be contested. According to Gábor Scheiring and Kristóf Szombati (2020, 726), the transition started to be experienced as "as an accumulation of injustices" and a "loss of control over one's life, of being at the mercy of uncontrollable forces" by many Hungarians, especially during and after the 2008 global economic crisis. András Bíró-Nagy (2017, 42) claims that while democracy was "identified with financial advancement and existential security" for the majority of the population, the reality of building a democratic state resulted in the underestimation of welfare issues by the political elites and an increase in social inequalities. According to numerous scholars of Hungarian political history, this was the central reason for the downfall of liberal political forces and the rise of right-wing, anti-liberal and racist sentiments in the country since the early 2000s (Bíró-Nagy, 2017; Molnár, 2016; Scheiring & Szombati, 2020; Sitter, 2011; Soós, 2015). The loss of political legitimacy of Hungary's Social Democratic party, the governing political power before the elections in 2010, was exacerbated by a scandal involving the party leader, Ferenc Gyurcsány. A secret recording of an internal party meeting was leaked to the media, where the prime minister admitted to lying about Hungary's economy and budgetary deficit during the elections in 2006 (Molnár, 2016). It is in this context of the political and economic crisis that Fidesz, by then a center-right party, won the elections with an overwhelming, two-thirds majority. As Aron Buzogány and Mihai Varga (2018) explain, the right-wingers in Hungary appealed to the public due to their critique of the existing political system, or the "minimalist state", however, "not from a welfare perspective, but from one critical of the state's failure to define, pursue, and promote national interests" (413). Fidesz incorporated some of the welfare issues into its platform, however, according to Soós (2015), their

“unorthodox economic policy” is a “mixture of neo-liberal elements [...], populist elements [...] and state intervention [...]”(101). Hence, the popular discontent with the integration into the global neoliberal economy in the transition period may have helped the election of the right-wing, populist-nationalist government, but, it has not resulted in the embracement of welfare principles by the state.

Fidesz’s Populist-Nationalism

Before discussing the populist-nationalist ideological platform that ensured the election of the far-right Fidesz party and still serves as a legitimizing ground for its politics, I want to clarify that the political profile and actions of Fidesz are inseparable from the figure of Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s prime minister and one of the founders of the party. Orbán’s charismatic and strong persona seems to be the embodiment of Fidesz’s political stances and party politics.

According to Noa Nogradi (2011), “the party cannot be described or analyzed separately from Orbán’s figure” (6). This is why, similar to other scholars (for example Bozóki, 2016; Soós, 2015), I often use Orbán’s politics, or Orbánism when describing the actions of the Hungarian government.

I describe the political climate that Fidesz’s government has created as populist nationalism. According to Singh (2021, 251) nationalism and populism are two distinct analytical categories which often overlap. While it’s not easy to provide a single and simple definition of populism, the core element that scholars outline when discussing the phenomenon is its anti-elitist nature. Szabó (2020, 25) cites Mudde in claiming that, at its core, populism is characterized by an antagonistic worldview that juxtaposes the interests of the “pure people against corrupt elites”. According to Singh (2021) populism doesn’t necessarily have any fixed aim, but it is a style of communication, often aggressive, performative and disruptive. According

to her, despite its varied goals, populism can be easily identified by its discursive repertoire. Nationalism, on the other hand, in its various manifestations is primarily an ideology aiming at building and maintaining an imagined national community, defined by territory, race, ethnicity, culture, symbolism or other criteria (Anderson, 2006; McLeod, 2010). However, it's hard to attribute one particular tactical style to nationalist projects. For Singh (2021) what connects populism and nationalism is their inherent dependence on the creation of an "us vs them" dichotomy, but the meanings of who represent the insiders and the outsiders varies based on the type of a populist rhetoric or a national project. Nationalism and populism overlap when nationalist leaders take up populism's discursive strategies, or vice versa, when populist leaders present themselves as representatives of national interests (Singh, 2021, 259). In recent years, we have seen the emergence of such nationalist-populist movements and governments around the world, in Latin America, USA, India and in Eastern as well as Western Europe. Fidesz's government in Hungary is one such example.

Fidesz's nationalist-populist leadership style was characterised by nationalist populist style since its early days in government. The party's first years in power were filled with revolutionary rhetoric, claiming to end lingering post-communist legacies and corruption in the country, and aiming to transform Hungary from being a victim of EU authorities and their political and economic impositions into a strong and independent nation-state (Csigó & Merkovity, 2016; Nogradi, 2011). Fidesz declared that the Hungarian people voted for the "Real Change of the Regime" that required a new political vision (Nogradi, 2011). The new system proposed by the government was populist in its rhetoric, as it spoke in the name of and appealed to wider masses allegedly exploited by the local and global 'liberal elites'. It was nationalist in its nature as it promised the "renewal and re-founding of the thousand-year-old Hungarian

nationhood in the third millennium and linked to the vision of Hungary's new status in Europe” (Humán Platform, 2020, 26). According to a report written by a group of Hungarian academics describing the political situation in the country, “Orbán's every gesture promised Hungarians an expansive, strong, proud, and globally successful Hungary, a kind of compensation for the severe wrongs the nation had endured” (Humán Platform, 2020, 26).

The economic, legal, political, and social changes initiated by Fidesz since its early days in power were indeed transformative. According to Sitter (2011), “[n]ever, in the history of the European Union, has an election in a member state resulted in political, legal and administrative changes of this magnitude over such a short period of time. This is as close as governments come to absolute power in a liberal democracy”. One and a half years after the elections, Fidesz initiated and changed 356 laws (Bokros, 2021). One of the most important changes was the creation and adoption of a new constitution in an unprecedentedly short timeframe of less than a year. The constitution was renamed and called a Fundamental Law of Hungary, and the concept of “republic” was taken out of it. Thus, the official name of the Hungarian state was replaced by the country’s name “as if the two would be the same” (Bokros, 2021, 32). The nationalist sentiments of the new fundamental law were evident in its preamble as well, which emphasized concepts such as “family”, “nation”, “work” and “order”, and the importance of the Christian religion for the nationhood (Fekete, 2016). According to Bozóki (2016), the new constitution created a vision for a nation consisting of family units instead of individuals. Hungarian population was hierarchized based on their ethnic/national or religious belonging and united by political loyalty to the nation (Bozóki, 2016). Similar principles were laid out in the System of National Cooperation, which the government created in 2010 and requested the declaration of its basic principles to be hung in every public office. The declaration presented Hungary as one big

family, each member loyally contributing to its wellbeing, united in a common purpose. The international scholarly and popular critique of Hungary's new Fundamental Law largely concentrated on the dismantling of the democratic checks and balances in Hungary.

Regulating gender and sexuality are important aspects of nationalist projects (Alexander, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Nationalist projects are often involved in regulating women's lives and sexuality by relegating them to the role of biological, cultural or symbolic reproduction of the nation (Mayer, 2000; McClintock, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 1997). National ideologies also define and regulate norms for femininities and masculinities around the ideal of the heterosexual family unit and construct non-normatively sexualized or gendered bodies as deviant and outsiders to the nation (Mosse 1985, Parker et.al 1991, Nagel 2002). Advocating for the so-called traditional gender and sexual norms was an important aspect of Fidesz's nationalist-populism as well. While in the early 2010s the fight against gender equality or feminism was not so vocally part of Fidesz's political agenda, gender scholars and activists in the country were already quite wary of the excessive use of heteronormative family language and traditional family values in Orbán's political campaigns. The updated constitution introduced a new clause defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. It was a seemingly redundant initiative, as same-sex marriage was not permitted by Hungarian law anyway, and the existing right of queer couples to form a civil union remained intact with the change. However, this change is a good indication of the discursive direction of Fidesz's government since its early days. Hungary's anti-gender politics have received significant international attention since 2018, after it banned gender studies in the country. However, systematic but seemingly inconsequential changes in this direction were always present in Fidesz's political agenda, showing that recent anti-gender

rhetoric of the government is embedded in the general right-wing and nationalist climate created by Fidesz.

Fidesz's investment in establishing a strong traditionalist, ethno-nationalistic, and anti-Roma and Anti-Semitic sentiments in the name of uniting the nation can also be observed in other symbolic domains. Characteristics of Fidesz's politics are the glorification of strong nationalist figures, such as Miklos Horthy; the revival of the imagery of "Greater Hungary" depicting Hungary's pre-Trianon Treaty borders; redesigning of public squares in accordance to the past historical periods; and the building of the statues and sculptures associated with Hungary's mythic past (Humán Platorm, 2020; Molnár, 2021). Many of these symbols, and especially the image of the pre-Trianon "Greater Hungary", serve as a symbol for Hungary's victimhood and dismemberment, alluding to a history of being treated unfairly by stronger political powers. The nationalist victim narrative revived by Fidesz, in turn, reinforces the political legitimacy of the government in the current day. It assigns the government rightful responsibility to protect the sovereignty and particular representations of cultural traditions of Hungary from contemporary threats. These threats within Orbán's populist-nationalist discourse are Muslim invasion, on one hand, and liberal democracy, human rights, and other political regulations of the EU, on the other. Thus, in Orbán's Hungary, the discourse of "democratization" and the unchallenged authority of the EU of the early transition era, has changed to prioritizing national interests and Christian traditional values.

Orbán's populist-nationalist discourse was well exemplified in his infamous speech at the annual Summer School in Romania in 2014 where Orbán introduced what he called illiberal democracy or an illiberal state as an alternative political system to western liberal democracies. Orbán criticized liberalism as a political system and an ideology that is doing more harm to

individual European nation-states, including Hungary, than good. Orbán's definition of liberalism is loose and all-encompassing. According to Nyysönen and Metsälä, (2021), "In Orbán's usage, 'liberal' is a loose concept referring to all of his opponents not only on the left but even on the center and the political right" (274). Most commonly, however, the critique of liberalism relates to the critique of individual, and primarily minority rights, globalization, alleged imposition of political correctness, multicultural ideas. More recently gender ideology was added to the list of such foreign threats. In Orbán's understanding, illiberal states escape the hegemony and the imperatives of the western liberal democracies, especially their insistence on equality and human rights, and build a strong state serving national interests. The definition of the nation-state, however, is strongly racialized, traditionalist, and majoritarian. It relies on slogans such as "Hungary for Hungarians", centers around heterosexual families, and claims to represent the interests of the "common people" or the whole nation (Bíró-Nagy, 2017). Furthermore, the addition of the Christian element to illiberalism links Hungarian identity to Christian and white Europe. As Fekete (2016) puts it, in Orbán's understanding, only Hungarians "have the courage to come to the defence of the status quo and preserve Europe's historic "ethnic and cultural composition" (43).

In this sense, Orbán presents Hungary's denial of such allegedly liberal impositions as openness to migration, multiculturalism, or gender equality as a way of preserving the historical roots of traditional Christian Europe. Thus, Hungarian populist-nationalism or the concept of illiberal democracy positions itself against two threats: contemporary, liberal Europe, represented by the EU and its governing bodies (often referred to as Brussels in Fidesz's campaigns), and the racialized others, such as Muslims, black people and local minorities, such as Roma and Jews.

Local feminists or other progressive actors in this discourse are usually depicted as agents supporting western liberal elite interests.

In this depiction, Hungary's defence of national and European interests gets constructed as a "freedom fight" – a fight against the liberal hegemony and for survival. Some scholars observe that this narrative mobilizes anti-colonial sentiments, which in Hungary's case, are rooted in historical traumas, such as Ottoman rule for over a century, loss of territories, or Soviet takeover. In this case, however, liberalism, Brussels, or the EU are represented as colonial powers (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Narkowicz & Ginelli, 2021). By engaging with anti-colonial critique, Fidesz indeed tapped into the popular feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration with western dominance amongst Hungarian people. Eastern European states, including Hungary, are often depicted as "permanently transitioning" and "less developed than the west" within European hierarchies (Kulpa, 2014; Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). And as the previously unquestioned paradigm of "catching up with the west" and "democratization" didn't bring the promised stability and well-being, the feelings of disillusionment and frustration with the superior status of Western Europe or the EU is indeed a common popular sentiment. In fact, as discussed earlier, it was one of the central reasons for Fidesz's election in the first place. And according to Graff & Korolczuk (2021), such instrumentalization of anti-colonial rhetoric is a key to the success of right-wing movements and politics in general.

However, when we look at Fidesz's use of anti-colonial rhetoric critically we see its contradiction with the basic principles of anti-colonial struggles. While it indeed aligns with some of the left-wing critiques of contemporary colonialisms directed at the broadly-conceived West, it is itself rooted in white supremacy and European, Christian superiority. In Hungary's case, aligning oneself with the colonial idea of white and Christian Europe is made easier

because unlike Western European states, in Eastern Europe, including in Hungary, guilt over one's imperial past is missing as they did not actively participate in Europe's colonial projects. Orbán himself has declared that: "they [western Europe] want to force on us Central Europeans their own logic, but we were never colonizers, we do not have such moral or political responsibilities. And not only did we not have colonies, we never called here anyone as guest workers, or for any other reason, to live with us" (Narkowicz & Ginelli, 2021). The claim of victimhood on the one hand and the refusal of responsibility, on the other, is often used by Fidesz for justifying its own racist, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant as well as anti-gender politics. It also depicts Hungary as a "Freedom Fighter" against hegemonic powers. For example, as Scheiring & Szombati (2020, 730) explain, the treatment of the migration crisis by Fidesz and the wall they built at Hungary's southern border symbolized "the barrier between 'civilisation' and 'barbarity', thus establishing Orbán as the leader of a pan-European civilisational crusade".

Changes in Hungary – From Liberal to Illiberal Social and Political Structures

The nationalist and populist ideological underpinnings of illiberalism and Christian democracy that depict Orbán as a national and international freedom fighter usually serve as justification for various political, social and economic changes implemented by Fidesz's government. Some scholars see them as tools for legitimizing Orbán's authoritarian rule (i.e. Nyysönen & Metsälä, 2021). Since 2010, Hungary's democratic system underwent major changes that concentrated absolute power in the hands of the ruling party. Some of the most important changes include the already-mentioned changes of the constitution; the weakening of the constitutional court; the emergence of a "national bourgeoisie", comprised of businessmen closely aligned with the Fidesz party and having control over Hungarian economic assets; changes in the electoral system so Fidesz can rule with a constitutional majority even when

receiving fewer votes; subordination of the prosecutor's office to the ruling party; the almost complete elimination of independent media; centralized governance of public education, including universities, schools and kindergartens; and last but not least, the curtailing of freedom of speech by dismantling reputable research institutions, controlling the distribution of research funding, letting go of politically-unfavourable academics, the closure of all gender studies programs, and the expulsion of a whole university from the country (Bokros, 2021).

Though the changes happened in various fields and institutions and in diverse ways, typically Fidesz's reforms are aimed at ensuring direct government control over the activities and discourses of institutions or individuals. This usually involves assigning government-affiliated personnel in supervisory roles in courts, media, schools, theatres, universities, etc. Andras Bozóki (2016, 99) describes that the level of control that Fidesz has achieved in Hungary, is only possible in a party where "no deserters, dissidents, internal opponents, leavers or members switching party allegiance are tolerated". According to them, disloyalty to Fidesz can often result in being targeted by the government and even the possible undermining of one's livelihood. The hierarchical system that Fidesz constructed since it declared the so-called "revolution", ensures that the government's "tentacles reach everywhere" (Bozóki, 2016, 99).

In this section of the chapter, I focus on some of the main political and legal changes as well as political campaigns of Fidesz that have had the most impact on feminist actors in Hungary in combination with the government's anti-gender rhetoric. First, I discuss Fidesz's interconnected anti-NGO and anti-Soros campaigns affecting feminist activists. I also discuss changes in the field of education resulting in the substantial restriction of academic freedom for feminist scholars among others. These broader changes in the non-profit sector and educational system combined with the government's anti-gender politics are major factors impacting the

lives and work of feminist activists and scholars discussed in the following chapters. In addition, the government's anti-gender campaigns were successful as they were entangled with its anti-NGO rhetoric and the systemic changes affecting the status of gender studies in Hungary were made possible due to the larger changes in the administration of higher education.

Governmental Campaigns: Soros and the NGOs as Threats to the Nation

Since 2010, Fidesz's government has carried out a few large-scale campaigns, mostly aiming to construct a new enemy against Hungarian nationhood and depicting the government as a saviour in service of the national interests. The first one of these campaigns was an anti-migration campaign in 2015, interestingly slightly before the actual migration crisis happened. It was later followed by anti-EU and anti-Soros campaigns also funded by the government. These campaigns were similar in describing migrants, the EU, or billionaire philanthropist George Soros as outsiders intruding into Hungary's internal affairs and destabilizing its national unity and economic stability. Large billboards distributed all over Hungary's capital Budapest and countrywide contained slogans such as, "If you come to Hungary, you need to respect our culture!", "If you come to Hungary, you cannot take the jobs of Hungarians!" (Bíró-Nagy, 2021, 6), "You have the right to know what Brussels plans!" or "We won't allow Soros to laugh last!" (Humán Platform, 2020, 23). While Fidesz's discourse about migration or the politics of Brussels as two national enemies were discussed earlier in this chapter, in this section I want to focus on the demonization of George Soros in governmental campaigns, as it is closely tied with demonizing of the non-profit sector, including feminist activism. George Soros became a figurehead of the evils associated with liberal democracy and the ideas such as equality and human rights that they allegedly impose on sovereign states.

George Soros, a Hungarian-born American-Jew, has been a major philanthropist in the countries of Eastern Europe, including Hungary. The billionaire businessmen's charity organization Open Society Foundation (OSF) is one of the largest funding agencies for causes such as democracy, human rights, and minority rights worldwide (Kalmar, 2020). The foundation is based on the values of Open Society as defined by philosopher Karl Popper, a personal favourite of Soros himself, and has made its mission to support the building of democracies in post-socialist states since the early days of transition. In Hungary, OSF has been the main funder for issues such as general democracy and transparency, women's and LGBTQ rights, and Roma rights. Thus, it has been the main support for the work of the civil society in the country. The politics of human rights funding and the export of ideas about women or LGBTQ equality grounded in ideas of progress and civility have long been critiqued by the feminist and/or queer left scholars and activists (Massad, 2007; Puar, 2007). The inner workings of the NGO sector and its dependence on Western sources of funding are critically analyzed within Hungarian feminist and LGBTQ circles as well. Fidesz's anti-Soros campaign utilized some of this critique for its populist and nationalist cause. It ultimately depicted George Soros as an individual embodiment of the "liberal financial elite and foreign intelligence agencies trying to undermine the Hungarian way of life by imposing forced immigration and LGBTQ agenda" (Szabó, 2020, 32). The government campaign also relied on anti-Semitic sentiment as it depicted George Soros as a powerful Jew, secretly controlling the world.

The anti-Soros campaign prepared ground for the governmental attack on local human rights actors, including feminist and LGBTQ organizations. The attack comprised of various elements. It started with the raiding of three human rights organizations in 2014 that received funding from the Norwegian Civic Fund. At that time, the Norwegian Civic Fund was accused of

political meddling and had to stop operations in the country, leaving various human rights organizations without financial support. Later the anti-NGO campaign continued in the media, depicting local NGOs as agents who carry out foreign interests and undermine Hungary's sovereignty. Soros in this context was presented as a face of 'foreign' and 'liberal' interests and thus any association with him and his foundation delegitimized local actors as 'foreign' as well. Various lists were leaked in online newspapers and national television naming individuals or organizations who allegedly represented a risk to national security were enemies of the Hungarian people or were Soros's puppets. In 2016, the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister itself declared that "[t]he sources of funding [were] being revealed, as [were] the secret service links, and which NGOs Represent[ed] which interest." It also promised that "the coming year [would] be about displacing Soros and the forces he symbolize[d]" (cited in Szabó, 2020, 32). In 2017, the government introduced a new, so-called foreign agent's law, a version of legislation enforced in Russia a few years before. According to the law, all NGOs that received foreign funding of more than 24000 Euros yearly had to declare themselves as "foreign-funded" and disclose their donors (Serhan, 2017). The law was officially justified as a necessary means for ensuring national security and self-defence, however, it strongly stigmatized local progressive civil society actors as serving foreign interests, global and all-powerful conspiracists, such as George Soros or the "dictatorship of liberal values". At the same time, it depicted the government as the only force fighting the 'elites' and representing the true interests of the people.

The attacks of Soros and the non-profit sector targeted feminist organizations among others. For example, when Hungarian pro-governmental media outlets published a list of organizations they deemed to be enemies of the state, four out of ten organizations were the

country's most visible feminist ones. However, compared to other human rights organizations on the list, these feminist ones were quite small-scale, underfunded and understaffed. Within the context of the attacks on funding structures such as the Norwegian Civic Fund and Open Society Foundation, feminist organizations, along with the human rights organizations, were depicted as agents, those who serve foreign and not the national interests.

Higher Education and Academic Freedom

Higher education is another field that was placed under governmental control since the early days of Fidesz's election and the restrictive changes in the educational sector have become larger and more and more impactful since. In its first year in power in 2011, Fidesz adopted a new act on higher education which assigned a chancellor, a government-appointed bureaucrat, to oversee the financial matters of all public universities together with university rectors. While the chancellor shouldn't formally intervene in the academic matters of the universities, this change ensured the government had a loyal person overseeing the management of each public higher education institution. The introduction of the chancellor required the revision in operational and organizational procedures of every institution resulting in the overly centralized structure of university management and funding distribution. The chancellor had the authority to judge various programs as economically unsustainable, leading to the closure of several programs known for their critical perspective towards the government, especially in social sciences (Humán Platform, 2020).

Another action illustrating the government's interest in regulating academia and academic thought in the country started in 2016-17 when the government forced Central European University (CEU) out of the country (within the context of the nationwide anti-Soros campaign). CEU, by then one of the leading universities not only in Hungary but in the region,

was founded by George Soros in 1991. Accredited both in Hungary and the USA, CEU offered graduate degree programs in a variety of disciplines, including social sciences and humanities, such as Sociology, Anthropology, Human Rights, Environmental Studies, and Gender Studies. CEU functioned as an international university offering financial support and English language programs to students from all over the world. However, in its first 20 to 30 years of existence, it prioritized students from Central and Eastern Europe and the Global South. CEU's mission of promoting the values of open society and self-reflective critical thinking (*Our Mission*, n.d.) together with its affiliation with George Soros, was used by the government to present it as a dangerous "liberal hub". In February 2017, Mária Schmidt, a Hungarian historian and outspoken supporter of Fidesz, declared CEU to be a fraud and a Soros University. Its students were described as agents of the 'Soros Empire' serving the 'shadow power' of the global liberal order (Humán Platform, 2020, 44). Soon the government adopted legislation known as Lex-CEU which would withdraw CEU's accreditation and make its operation illegal in Hungary. The fact that Central European University had a Gender Studies department was one of the main arguments within governmental discourse when claiming that CEU was a brainwashing liberal institution instead of an educational one. Despite a legal battle and popular local and international public uproar, CEU was forced to leave the country in 2018 and relocate to Vienna. Lex-CEU was found incompatible with the EU legal system by the Court of Justice of the European Union in 2020, however, the university did not return (Pap, 2021).

Another attack on academic institutions was carried out in 2018 when the government fully reorganized one of its most reputable research institutes, the Academy of Sciences. The Academy of Sciences, an autonomous research entity that received government funding, operated multiple research centres and institutes conducting research in a variety of disciplines. It

also provided a platform for acquiring international grants and launching international projects for local scholars. The Academy of Sciences employed almost 5000 researchers and was well-known for its high-quality, independent research in the region. Interestingly, the attack on the Academy of Sciences was preceded by its president József Pálinkás's statement of personal and institutional support of CEU. Pálinkás was labelled to be anti-government in state-supported media and had to leave his position in two months. Soon after, the Academy received a letter from the government informing it about the planned cuts to its budget and the necessity of the restructuring. The process of restructuring was ambiguous and long, but essentially, dissenting Hungarian academics agree that it resulted in diminishing the power, prestige, and funding for the Academy of Sciences, Hungary's most extensive academic research network, and effectively placed it under governmental control (Humán Platform, 2020; Pap, 2021). Historically, the Academy of Sciences provided space and funding for gender and sexuality-related research among other disciplines, which under governmental control is unlikely to continue.

These institutional changes in the Hungarian higher education system, however, do not adequately describe the constraints put on academic freedom in the country. In addition to defunding and closure of programs, tax raids or transformation of these institutions, smaller-scale changes within academic and research institutions ensure ideological control over academic teaching and research at the level of university programs and departments. Such smaller measures include restricting the publication of controversial academic pieces, banning academic events affiliated with blacklisted NGOs or individuals, intimidation of academic staff in pro-governmental media through memes, satirical pieces and name-calling, and encouragement of students to report "liberal" and thus anti-government academics (Pap, 2021). For example, Pap (2021, 3) provides an example of a dean of the Law School at the University of Debrecen

banning a publication already accepted by the editorial board of the law journal of the University of Debrecen for “admittedly political reasons”. Several educational institutions have lost governmental funding for their solidarity to Central European University during the government’s attack on the institution and a social science journal *Századvég* was revoked from the press (Pap, 2021). Many academics fear losing their reputation, funding or job as their everyday activities, such as liking anti-governmental posts on social media, are monitored by their pro-governmental colleagues, students or media (i.e. Körtvélyesi, 2020). The academic climate, based on fear, censorship, intimidation and discreditation, places serious burdens on exercising academic freedom by Hungarian scholars and often encourages self-censorship as well (Körtvélyesi, 2020; Pap, 2021). The burden is especially heavy for those who represent social sciences or disciplines disliked by the government, usually the disciplines which have a critical tradition, gender-related scholarship being one of them. Social sciences and humanities in the governmental narrative are often criticized for “not producing real value” while continuing to corrupt “the public and the youth” (Körtvélyesi, 2020). It is within this context that the government banned gender studies in all of Hungary and started to incorporate anti-gender rhetoric in its public discourse more explicitly.

Gender in the Fidesz Regime

Since 2010, the populist-nationalistic politics of Fidesz was oriented toward building a traditional, heterosexual, family-oriented nation in its discourse and practice. Since the early days of forming a government, the Fidesz project of building a Christian, white, European, but at the same time, unique Hungary, relied on centring heterosexual families as the basic units of the nation. The strong language around family and family values, as well as the prohibition of same-sex marriage in the new constitution, are good examples of this. In addition, one of the early

changes that Fidesz's government initiated was getting rid of any mention of the word gender and replacing it with strong family language in kindergarten and school curricula (Fodor, 2022). Several discussions and initiatives were also directed at banning abortion. They didn't result in a complete abortion ban but did make access to it more complicated for women.

However, while traditional family and anti-feminist politics were always part of the Hungarian right-wing government, the emergence of a strong anti-gender rhetoric happened later, in 2017-2018. Even feminist scholars critical of the governmental politics around gender equality and women's rights pointed out that Hungary didn't have a strong anti-gender movement before this time. For example, Andrea Peto's and Eszter Kováts's (2017) chapter in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe, Mobilizing against Equality* claims that the existing traditionalist and family centred regime of the government in fact prevented a strong anti-gender movement from emerging in the country. The governmental politics were traditionalist, family centred and anti-feminist, but anti-gender rhetoric as defined in Chapter 1 was rarely used in public campaigns or by right-wing pro-governmental groups. However, the situation changed soon after Peto and Kováts's publication.

The government's anti-gender discourse is specific in its rhetoric. It uses concepts such as gender ideology or gender theory to signify an evil, trojan horse invading the fabric of the society by introducing foreign ideas about sex, gender, and family. In this narrative, gender or gender ideology functions as a catch-all word to signify multiple threats to the nation and its traditional ways of being. It is depicted as one aspect of a global liberal conspiracy, changing the common ways of the people. In this way, according to Erzsebet (Barát, 2022, 174-5), it functions as an empty signifier and produces "diverse chains of equivalences around the concept of "gender ideology". Gender theorists became one of the national threats together with Muslim

immigrants, George Soros's all-powerful Jewish conspiracy, or intellectuals producing no value. These narratives, especially declaring gender to be an ideology and a threat to the nation, and people working with gender issues as the agents of the liberal conspiracy were mobilized in Hungary within the context of anti-Soros, anti-EU and anti-migrant campaigns. It became the next enemy among the others and interconnected with them. The so-called "gender-craze", according to Barát, became one of the main reasons for the potential "death of the nation" (Barát, 2020,120).

One of the first times when the Hungarian government and pro-governmental media engaged in nationalist anti-gender rhetoric was in 2017 when the first and only Hungarian Language MA program in Gender Studies opened at ELTE university. As discussed in Chapter 1, the program, which enrolled around ten MA students, was depicted as a new national threat initiated by the liberal ideologists, aiming at corrupting young Hungarians, urging them to change their gender and turning traditional Hungarian culture on its head. The academic staff of the program had to answer the questions such as "why do you want third gender toilets" or "why do you want to want to change our children's sex" in media interviews. The media smear campaign was followed up by official governmental intervention in the summer of 2018 when the government took gender studies out of the ministerial list of the creditable disciplines within Hungary (Barát, 2022). Simultaneously, a "Family Studies" program was initiated and instituted at the Economics program of Corvinus University, another major Budapest University. Establishing a family studies program in place of the gender studies program was a discursive move by the government, declaring that it took care of what mattered for the nation-state: families (Barát, 2022). It also implied that the families were understood as traditional, heterosexual units.

Since 2017, the anti-gender rhetoric and politics of the Hungarian government have become stronger and stronger. In 2020-21, during the height of the global pandemic, the government adopted a few important legal changes, one of which was the adoption of a “Paedophilia Act”, similar to the Russian anti-LGBTQ propaganda law, that forbids the promotion of homosexuality or deviance from the sex assigned at birth. Another legal change was the introduction of the Article 33 omnibus law that required defining sex at birth and disallowing any change afterwards. Finally, the adoption law was also changed in 2020, allowing only married couples to adopt children. If the Hungarian LGBTQ community could previously adopt a child as individuals, this possibility was now taken away from them (Beres-Deak, 2021; Wareham, 2020). Interestingly at the time of my research, feminist organizations and scholars were under more targeted attacks by the government than LGBTQ or Trans rights organizations. However, the change of focus was a natural extension of anti-gender rhetoric, where gender functions as a symbolic glue for various issues (Peto, 2021) and was anticipated by queer and trans actors. The prohibition of the possibility for a person to transition from one gender to another and defending children from the harm of the gender ideology were at the core of anti-gender discourse. Essentially, as explained in Chapter 1, anti-gender discourse claims that gender, as a concept distinguishes biological sex from the social one and encourages multiple possibilities for gender and sexual identifications. Anti-gender discourse, utilized by the Hungarian government, argues that there is only biological sex, and that gender scholarship is just an ideology trying to shift the natural sex order (Barát, 2020). In this sense, prohibiting the understanding of sex and gender as socially constructed within the law, was the government’s way of delegitimizing gender-informed knowledge, together with delegitimizing the lived and embodied experiences of its trans and LGBTQ citizens.

Feminist Vulnerabilities to the Right-Wing Attacks in Hungary

As will be shown in greater detail in Chapter 4, the government's anti-gender rhetoric and politics were effective in limiting opportunities for conducting feminist work in Hungary. In this section, I provide a short historical overview of feminist academic and activist fields in Hungary since 1989 and show the reasons why they were particularly vulnerable to the right-wing climate described above and the state's anti-gender critique.

There is a long history of feminist work in Hungary, starting from the turn of 20th-century feminisms and continuing with women centric-research and organizing under State Socialism (Fodor & Varsa, 2009). However, contemporary feminist scholarship and activism in the country are closely tied with the post-socialist transition since 1989. (Fábián, 2002, 2015; Fodor & Varsa, 2009; Zimmermann, 2008). Both the institutionalization of gender studies as an academic discipline and the appearance of the first feminist activist groups and organizations still influencing feminist politics started in this period. In the late 80s and early 90s, gender-related scholarship and feminist activism in the post-socialist region including in Hungary were closely connected with each other as well as so called "democratization" process, " (Barchunova, 2003; Cerwonka, 2008a; Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2003). As Guenther (2011, 873) argues, "while certainly not entirely unproblematic, overall the European Union has opened up new pathways for external legitimacy for feminist organizations in the region."

In Hungary's academic circles, feminism first appeared as individual courses initiated by local and sometimes Western academics teaching about the gendered organization of the society in the early 90s (Daskalova et al., 2010). Scholars emphasize the energy and willingness of individual actors who took on extra work to educate themselves as well as to create a community of researchers and students interested in feminist issues (Cerwonka, 2008a; Zimmermann, 2008).

According to Daskalova et al., (2010, 199) these initiatives fostered the creation of a “loose network of intellectuals and activists” who were open to engaging in the conversations about social problems and sharing information and resources, such as books, teaching materials etc. The first gender-related courses in Hungary were based in the departments of American or British Studies, as these spaces provided better access to feminist literature, theoretical insights into the Anglo-Saxon academic world and travel opportunities for feminist scholars (Fodor & Varsa, 2009; Petó, 2018). Departments of American and British studies are the “bastions of gender studies scholarship in Hungary” until today (Fodor and Varsa, 2009, p. 295). Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest was one of the first to offer gender-related and feminist courses in the early 90s. These courses were led by now famous feminist scholars and activists, such as Enikő Bollobás or Maria Adamik as well as Antonia Burrows, a British scholar who played an important role in the development of the early feminist movement in Hungary (Daskalova et al., 2010; Fábián, 2015). Szeged University was another important place that fostered the creation of feminist academic spaces. It integrated gender-related courses in its curriculum as well as institutionalized gender studies by offering a specialization certificate in the field (László, 2011, 4). Later, in 2005 the Department of English Studies at the University of Szeged started an annual conference titled *Language, Ideology and the Media - Gender/Sexuality Relations in Hungary*, which is still one of the major Hungarian feminist conferences in the country (Fodor & Varsa, 2009; László, 2011). The British literature department at the University of Debrecen and a Centre for Gender and Cultural Studies at Corvinus University are other examples supporting early feminist research and teaching (Daskalova et al., 2010, 200). However, there was no Hungarian accredited gender studies program in the country until 2007. Central European University, an American university in Budapest, ran a one-year US accredited program in

Gender Studies since 1996 and in 2007, it managed to also acquire a Hungarian accreditation for its two-year English-language MA program in Gender Studies (Zimmermann, 2008). In 2017, ELTE also established its first-ever Hungarian language Gender Studies MA program. As already discussed, the program had to shut down in 2018 since the government took away its accreditation of gender studies as an academic discipline. Despite the existence of these diverse hubs for gender-related scholarship and individual motivations behind starting them, as Zimmerman (2008, 135) argues, since the 90s “the new “Gender Agenda” was closely linked to the democratization agenda”. According to Cerwonka (2008, 87) all individual efforts of initiating gender studies in Hungary were supported by Western funding as a way of fostering democratic values during the transition. Today, since much of gender-related scholarship in Hungary was scattered across various departments and disciplines, many of the feminist scholars were not directly affected by the closure of gender studies and cautiously continue working in a hostile climate. However, as I discuss in Chapter 4, their work is often restricted and negatively impacted by the right-wing anti-gender climate.

In the early 90s, the institutionalization of gender studies as a discipline was closely allied with the emergence of feminist activism in the country. One of the first feminist groups in Hungary was established in 1991 and was called the Hungarian Feminist Network. The group consisted of the teachers and the students who gathered at ELTE university to discuss feminist theory. Feminist Network ran a successful campaign against the restriction of abortion rights in Hungary in 1992 and is also the predecessor of now the largest and strongest feminist organization NaNE (Nok a Noké rt Egyu tt az Eroszak Ellen, Women against Domestic Violence), established in 1994. Since its foundation, NaNe has focused on combating gender-based violence. It operates a helpline for the victims of domestic violence, advocates for legal

changes for addressing issues such as domestic violence and provides various services to the survivors (Guenther, 2011). Another long-standing organization influencing Hungary's feminist activist field is Patent, a sister organization to NaNE that focuses on legal support for women experiencing violence (Patent, n.d.). The Hungarian Women's Lobby is plays important part in Hungary's feminist life. It was established in 2003 and is an umbrella organization uniting Hungarian feminist groups and representing them at European Women's Lobby (Hungarian Women's Lobby, n.d.). Labrisz started up as an informal group in 1996 and officially registered as an organization in 1999 (Labrisz, n.d.). It is an LBT women's organization with feminist agenda. Despite over 30 years of history of organizing, Kriszan and Sebestyen (2019) argue that the contemporary Hungarian feminist movement is relatively "weak" primarily because of its limited resources. According to them, the Hungarian state "never provided long-term, sustainable financial support for women's groups, especially not institutional support" (Kriszan and Sebestyen, 2019, p. 89). Since its inception, the movement has relied on volunteer work and support from international funders, such as the Open Society Foundation, the Global Fund for Women, the EU etc. (Guenther, 2011, p. 872). More recently new and less formalized feminist groups started to appear in the Hungarian feminist scene. These groups usually focus on specific feminist concerns, such as obstetric violence (ALIZA) and take a leftist feminist perspective (NEM!) (Eredics, 2020; Peterson, 2017).³

³ Hungary's academic and activist feminist circles are predominantly white and ethnically Hungarian. Hungary's most marginalized and racialized communities such as Roma women are barely represented in the movement. Until the last 5 years, Roma feminism in the country mostly consisted of few and small-scale individual organizations providing service to Roma women and scattered around the country. However, more recently a few Roma academics have started voicing their concerns about the exclusion of Roma women and their needs by Hungary's feminist movement (see for example work of Angela Kosze). As I discuss in Chapter 6, these academic conversations have not yet made a considerable impact on mainstream women's organizations and their work. However, they bring up important questions about intersectionality, decoloniality and marginalization and create networks with Roma feminist groups in other Eastern European states.

Hungarian feminism's dependence on international Human Rights actors has been critiqued by various scholars. Fábíán (2015, 3) argues that "Western reorientation has provided a lifeline in the form of financial and moral support for women's organizations", but the consequences of this support have been ambiguous at best. According to Fábíán (2015), such a dependence made it hard to create a sustainable feminist movement in Hungary as the local feminist agenda moved from national concerns to "explicitly transnational and thus more resonant issues." (Fábíán, 2015, p. 4). Guenther (2011) argues that foreign funding can often "push" feminist movements in directions that appease their funders. According to her, prioritization of the issues of domestic violence instead of welfare-related topics is linked to the transnationalization of the feminist movement in Hungary. Focus on foreign partnerships also reduced the capacity of feminist organizations to build relationships locally and a strong base of support (Guenther, 2011, p. 872). Finally, according to Zimmerman (2008) inclusion of support to feminist groups in the discourses and politics of "democratization" gave "gender studies the role of a "symbolic maker" of westernization and the compliant incorporation of Central and Eastern Europe [...] into the western dominated global system." (Zimmermann, 2008, p. 141).

According to Cerwonka (2008), feminist scholars cannot afford to be ignorant of larger transnational political and economic processes that supported the institutionalization of their scholarship and activism and they must negotiate their complex entanglements with the neo-liberalization of former socialist states. This is especially relevant in today's right-wing anti-gender context in Hungary, where historical rootedness in the process of "democratization" and "transition" is utilized for attacking feminist work and depicting it as a western-imposed ideology by the government. As outlined in this chapter, the Fidesz party heavily capitalized on popular dissatisfaction and contempt towards integrating with Europe for gaining public support

and depicting various actors as national threats. The association of feminism with the Western progressivist agenda and funders made it an easy target for the government. Fidesz's anti-gender campaigns and a general attack on women's rights were usually explained as Hungary's self-defence from moral and ideological impositions of the West. The situation of feminist groups became more complicated within the current right-wing climate as financial support from the state was completely cut off for feminist groups, and they depend on Western donors for survival.

It is in such a context of navigating right-wing anti-gender political climate and feminist dependency on international support that anti-gender feminism emerged in Hungary. As the rest of this dissertation argues, the right-wing and anti-gender political climate weakened the feminist movement, increased its visibility, depicted it as a national enemy, and limited the avenues for feminist work. The hostile climate has made devising survival strategies within the right-wing anti-gender context central to feminist debates and discussions. Anti-gender feminist discourse emerged as a supposedly new and more-progressive feminist strategy within such conditions. It claims that responding to the "real" needs of local, average women could help feminist movements to be seen as legitimate actors instead of "foreign threats" or "trojan horses". It is critical of the progressivist agendas imposed by the West and prioritizes economic concerns of Hungarian women connected to care-work or labour issues. However, such a strategy also leads many feminists to explicitly separate feminist interests from the interests of trans communities, sex-worker rights and even from the struggles of the local, racialized women.

The impact of right-wing anti-gender rhetoric on feminist politics and the emergence of anti-gender feminism is more obvious if we look at feminist work in Hungary before the government attacks. The debates over issues such as trans inclusion, sex work and, to a lesser

extent, race, emerged in Hungary in the context of finding strategies to cope with the government's anti-gender politics and were not necessarily at the forefront of the feminist agenda before 2010. Eva Fodor and Eszter Varza's article, published in 2009, provides a comprehensive analysis of the academic feminist work in the field of social sciences in Hungary. Their research, based on a survey with over fifty feminist scholars, includes a comprehensive list of literature published in the area of gender studies and a focus group discussion with prominent scholars which demonstrates three major themes that shaped the topics of research in gender studies in Hungary up until 2009: 1) gender relations, women's participation in public sphere and workplace inequalities, 2) study of domestic and sexual violence and 3) study of women's history before and during the Soviet era. While Fodor and Varza (2009) outline opportunities and challenges for gender-related scholarship in post-transition Hungary, such as support from Western institutions, local institutional barriers, or Hungarian scholars' asymmetrical positioning within global scientific circles, they claim to have found overwhelmingly rich "disciplinary traditions" (290). According to Fodor and Varza (2009, 291) "even a cursory look at the academic landscape cannot miss the proliferation of gender studies projects and institutions in the past 20 years". However, their analysis of feminist academic diversity doesn't point to any debates or contradictions between Hungarian academics that had made their way into academic publications or popular discourse. While this doesn't indicate that feminist work was particularly inclusive of the trans communities, sex workers or racialized groups at that time, the research does show that these topics were not contributing to an open conflict among feminists either. As described above, after their initial contribution to public discussions over abortion, feminist organizations in Hungary have primarily focused on addressing the issue of domestic and sexual violence. Discussions about the state of feminist activism in early post-transition Hungary are

mostly concerned with the difficulties of feminist organizing in Hungary, the negative public attitudes and insufficient resources for the movement (see Adamik, 1993; Arpad & Marinovich, 1995). Internal feminist divisions along the lines of defining gender or its inclusivity seem to not have been important concerns for the movement at that time. However, issues such as non-normative sexualities were not completely missing from the feminist agenda either. For example, Labrisz, a lesbian feminist organization, established in 1994 has been supported by larger feminist organizations, such as NANE since their foundation. The support has involved cooperation on multiple projects, providing free space for community gatherings etc.

Discussions and debates about such issues as intersectionality, trans inclusion or sex work that started to emerge in feminist publications from Hungary more recently (see for example Feró & Bajusz, 2018; Kováts, 2018a, 2018b) and were one of the central concerns for the participants of this dissertation are not unique to Hungarian feminism. However, in Hungary these topics are almost always discussed in relation to the recent governmental attacks towards feminism and the strategies of surviving within the hostile right-wing anti-gender climate. For example, Kováts (2019) in her recent article asserts that framing social issues, such as gender equality, in terms of culture and identity while ignoring their economic aspects is one of the reasons for the success of right-wing anti-gender discourses in Hungary. She brings the issues of sex work and gender identity as two examples for her argument. Kováts (2019, 75) argues that the pro-choice and human rights approach to sex-work dismisses the fact that “many Hungarian women are sold in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands” and that “there is such extreme poverty in certain parts of Hungary that there are many women who see no other option than prostitution to provide for themselves or their families”. Ignoring these dynamics, according to her, detaches pro-sex work feminist politics from the local realities of the Hungarians and thus

makes it vulnerable to right-wing anti-gender critique. In addition, she argues the right-wing is correct in detecting the shift in the meaning of gender, which now is seen as an equivalent of gender identity and expression transnationally. This shift, according to her, helps right-wing anti-gender actors to depict “any gender equality claims as suspicious” (Kováts 2019, 67). Kováts’s primary concern over protecting feminism from the accusations of right-wing movements is a good example of how the right-wing anti-gender political climate played an important role in introducing topics that would spark conflict among feminist groups, even if these topics were not part of the feminist agenda before. As we will see in the rest of this dissertation, the feminist anti-gender discourse, which is usually articulated as a strategy of coping with the right-wing anti-gender climate and argues for a majority oriented feminist agenda, gained dominance within Hungarian feminist circles in recent years.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the social and political context in Hungary to locate and explain anti-gender politics of the Hungarian government and its relation to Hungary’s feminist project. I discussed the main aspects of Fidesz’s nationalist populism, which created a fertile ground for the government’s use of anti-gender discourse. I reviewed the major legal and political changes implemented by Fidesz’s government that created a general restrictive climate in the country and enabled institutional changes such as banning of the gender studies departments, the expulsion of the Central European University from the country, and limiting the work of non-governmental organizations and the academic freedom of scholars. At the end of the chapter, I discussed how the feminist movement that emerged in post-socialist Hungary was vulnerable to right-wing critique and how surviving the hostile, anti-gender climate contributed to the creation of divisions and conflicts among Hungarian feminists.

Chapter 4: Impacts of Fidesz's Regime on Feminist Actors and Their Coping Strategies

As discussed in the previous chapter, Fidesz's government has implemented anti-feminist politics since its early days in power. However, since the years 2017–2018, the government's initiatives targeting feminist work have relied on anti-gender rhetoric, depicting gender-related work as foreign-imposed ideology and a threat to the very survival of the Hungarian nation. In this chapter, I argue that the state-orchestrated, right-wing, anti-gender climate has had multiple and controversial impacts on the work and lives of feminist actors in the country. It has changed the social and political positioning of gender-related scholarship and activism. If in the early 1990s Hungarian feminist actors were seen by their colleagues and the general public to be irrelevant to 'real' politics, more recently they have been treated as oppositional figures to the government, threats to the nation, and dangers for their departments or collectives.

Such politicization of gender-related work, on the one hand, has increased support for feminist efforts amongst anti-governmental or left-leaning colleagues and students as well as some foreign funders. On the other hand, however, it has resulted in lowered institutional and financial support for feminist activities, intensified governmental, media and far-right attacks on feminist actors, and increased feelings of insecurity and vulnerability amongst feminist actors. Feminist scholars and activists have coped with the challenges of living and working in this right-wing and anti-gender climate in different ways. Some have continued their work without compromise, while others have resorted to what Gayatri Spivak (2006) has called "strategic essentialism" or even sometimes self-censorship. Finally, the right-wing political climate has become a reason for many feminist scholars and activists to leave Hungary.

These impacts on feminist actors in Hungary are central in understanding the overall shift in feminist politics and rhetoric in the country. This dissertation argues that anti-gender feminism has emerged as a predominant feminist discourse in Hungary as a response to, and in order to survive within, the right-wing anti-gender rhetoric of the state. In this chapter, I provide an analysis of the challenges experienced by Hungarian feminist actors, such as changes to the social and political positioning of gender-related work, lessening of the institutional support for feminist activities and increased media and far-right group hostility. I also detail the coping strategies adopted by the feminist actors including continuing the work without a compromise, adopting strategic language or exercising self-censorship or leaving the country. In the following chapter, I demonstrate how the challenges of living and working in right-wing and anti-gender state have contributed to anti-gender feminist arguments.

Changes to the Social and Political Positioning of Feminist Actors

Many participants in my research mentioned during interviews that gender had become a “bad word”, was “dangerous” (Zoé), “a politically loaded term” (Iren), and part and parcel of the “liberal and Western thinking” (Lilla) that was opposed by the government since 2017. Gender-related work has thus been integrated into the mainstream political domain and become a highly sensitive subject. “The whole process is over-politicized,” said Klára, reflecting on the possibilities of continuing her research and teaching gender courses at the university. “There is an academic standard, but you can never know whether it can be kept or not,” she added. Klára, who was one of the founders of an institute of gender-related research at her university in the 1990s, explained that the staff and university administration had been replaced by those who were “more politically loyal” to the government and that since gender has come to be seen as an oppositional ideology, she is not certain if she will be able to continue her work. According to

Klára, following academic standards of research and teaching is no longer enough for ensuring the safety of one's work and position.

Most participants attributed such politicization of gender-related scholarship to the government's more recent anti-gender politics. They recalled that feminist scholarship and activism have been treated, at best, in an ambivalent manner since the early 1990s, when the first feminist initiatives appeared in post-socialist Hungary by university administrations, faculty, or other human rights actors. Participants reported their colleagues have often assessed feminist initiatives as “not really serious” (Dorottya), “too activisty” (Dorottya) or “too radical” (Katalin). However, according to participants, gender-related scholarship and activism have generally been treated as not relevant for ‘real’ politics. Klára explained:

People [...] were more interested in the transformation from the socialist system into another regime. [...] they were sure that it was such an important idea [...] to speak about the transformation of power, from political to economic power... they thought that [women's issues] were simply not important. It [came] only later, and [had] nothing to do with important things.

Like Klára, Lilla, another gender scholar who had taught gender-related courses since the 90s and was one of the first scholars at her department to integrate a gender-aware lens in her research, remembered that when she started to teach her first gender-related courses “uninterest was the problem”. Her colleagues would often wonder why she chose such a niche discipline. According to her, gender-related work may have been seen as “something exotic” at the start of her career, but it was never viewed as “anything dangerous” unlike in recent years (Lilla).

Despite the existence of typical anti-feminist attitudes, overall, feminist scholars and activists did not report facing any major institutional barriers in their attempts to start feminist organizations, establish gender studies as an academic discipline, or teach gender-related courses. For example, Iren, a Hungarian gender scholar working at an international university

and researching women's lives and work in socialism and post-socialist transition in Hungary, recalled being "distinctly worried" in 2004 about whether the accreditation committee would take the first proposal for accrediting an MA program in Gender Studies seriously, but the program faced no problems. It was launched and operated at Central European University uninterrupted until the mobilization of anti-liberal and anti-gender discourse by the government in 2017. Some scholars even remembered explicit support from their departments in their various gender-related initiatives. For example, Gábor, who was now close to retirement age and was a founder of one of the first gender research centers at a second largest university in Budapest, remembered that in 2001, when they proposed the establishment of the research centre, they "were supported by the Senate, [and] by everyone." According to him, "there were no conflicts. [They] were accepted and were encouraged by the university leadership".

Feminist activists also recalled their ability to be easily involved in political processes or legal initiatives and have their voices heard on various political platforms in the 1990s and early 2000s. Mary, who played a crucial role in founding Hungarian Feminist Network in the early 90s as well as in starting to teach gender-related courses at a university level, told a story that she accidentally attended a seminar about abortion where she was offered to participate in parliamentary committee discussions about an abortion law. As a result, she and her other colleagues managed to successfully advocate for better access to abortions. Mary explained:

The only reason of saying that story was to say how easy it was to get into a group [...] who were actually in Parliament. [...] We could just talk to these people and [we were] sort of taking part in their policy discussions too, and it was just all in bare feet, it was just all much less formal. [...] So, it was much easier.

As discussed in Chapter 3, since its election in 2010, the Fidesz government has not been supportive of gender-equality; in fact, it has instituted several family-oriented and anti-feminist initiatives since its early days (e.g., prohibiting gender-related language in kindergartens,

changing the constitution). However, most of my research participants were able to safely continue their academic or activist work until anti-gender rhetoric—as outlined in the previous chapter—became part of the official state discourse and politics in 2017–2018. It was at this time when feminist scholarship and activism started to be defined as political opposition to the Hungarian state, a threat to the Hungarian nation, and a danger for academic and activist collectives.

Redefining the concept of gender within mainstream public discourse was one of the main characteristics of Fidesz’s anti-gender politics. According to participants, many of their colleagues, students and friends now understand gender to be an ideology that is about changing one’s gender identity and not about inequalities between men and women. Orsolya, who is now a leader of one of the largest feminist organizations and has been involved in feminist organizing and activism since early days of post-socialist transition, stated that since the governmental attack on gender, she has had to clarify her use of the concept of gender almost daily. She said,

When I give lectures, it's very interesting what I see. It did mean equality between men and women and that's how EU, [...] UN and other policy documents still use the word, and [in] 90% of the cases it only means women. But these university students think that gender is about your sexual orientation. [...] They say "It's about whether I am gay or not, or what I identify with". And the fact that it's about distribution of power and inequality [...] among the groups of men and women, that's only very well-read feminists... only those who already have read some feminist literature who use it in this sense.

Orsolya’s narrative shows how right-wing anti-gender rhetoric defines gender differently from many other feminist organizers (see Kovats, 2018). She explained that gender is now understood as a marker of identity instead of being seen as a term describing structural inequalities between men and women. While gender can indeed have multiple meanings for various groups, this understanding of the concept has become the dominant one in Hungary. For

example, Zoé, who was in her 20s, was a recent graduate of gender studies and was currently working in a non-profit sector recalled that when she enrolled in the Gender Studies MA program, people around her assumed that she was going to study the differences between multiple genders. She said that many understand the concept of gender in these terms: “there are seventy-five genders, you can change when you want to”. She added, “they think that's what [Gender Studies is] all about.”

Within the right-wing anti-gender discourse, the fluidity of one’s sexual or gender identification is depicted as a danger to the fabric of society and the very survival of humankind. Corredor (2019, 625), for example, cites various texts from the Catholic Church defining “gender ideology” as a “nefarious theory [that] disrupts the moral fabric of society because it encourages everyone to ‘invent him/herself’ (Alzamora Revoredo 2003, 465) by erasing differences between men and women, promoting homosexuality, and inciting gender confusion”. Fidesz’s right-wing government uses similar anti-gender rhetoric. For example, according to Barát (2020, 175), the Hungarian government appropriated the concept of gender which they defined as an ideology threatening the very survival of “us, the Hungarian people” by erasing differences between men and women. Marianna, a participant of this research and a fresh graduate from a doctoral program in gender studies, explained the government’s depiction of gender ideology as a national threat through debates about the closure of the gender studies department:

People of Gender Studies want Hungarians to die out - that was the argument. [...] Gender studies people want to ruin a family. Family understood as a Christian, nuclear, plutonic heterosexual family setting. And it's a discourse of death - because family equals life, and therefore this is a discourse of death, anything that questions the family.

Finding an “outsider” and an “abnormal” who threatens the survival of the nation is typical of various nationalist projects, as is the maintenance of traditional and heterosexual

family structures (Alexander, 1994; Kaplan et al., 1999; Mosse, 1985). Anti-gender narratives fit into Hungarian nationalist sentiments easily. By questioning the essence of biological sex, or as Zoé described, by espousing “seventy-five gender identities,” gender scholars and activists (along with immigrants and Muslim others) are depicted as threats to the very survival of the Hungarian nation, which relies on heterosexual familial bonds. While Fidesz’s government presents itself as a defender of Hungarian nationhood, gender scholars and activists have quickly become not only anti-national but also anti-governmental actors. Within the anti-gender and right-wing political climate in Hungary, therefore, the social and political value of gender-related work has changed. It has instead become one of the central threats to the familialist and traditionalist state discourse.

Lilla discussed feminist actors being seen as political threats to their professional collectives and universities. For example, she explained, if she proposed a gender-related research proposal at her faculty meeting, she would face comments such as: “gender? don’t do that.” She said that since gender is seen as a political danger by the government, proposing gender-related research is viewed as risky by most of her colleagues. In the Hungarian context, where the government oversees the budgetary matters of the university, being flagged as confrontational could result in the closure of a department. “They can say ‘oh this program doesn’t make enough money’,” Lilla explained. Such examples of avoiding gender-related work for the well-being of a wider institution are common in the activist field as well. For example, Irmuska, a recent PhD graduate whose work looked at gendered aspects of the right-wing organizing, had to leave her job at a local non-profit when it became clear that her superior had taken out the gender component of the project she was working on. According to her, since the attacks on gender ideology have become mainstream, some human rights organizations have

tried to stay out of governmental scrutiny by dropping their gender-related activities. Irmuska's job, in this case, represented a threat to her workplace.

To summarize, the anti-gender climate has changed the social and political positioning of feminist actors. Even if their work did not enjoy wide acceptance and appreciation by their colleagues or public since feminist organizing started in the 1990s, feminist initiatives did not usually face institutional barriers. Feminist scholarship and activism were often seen to be irrelevant to real politics, but they were not perceived to be politically dangerous. The anti-gender rhetoric of Fidesz's government, however, redefined gender-related work as gender ideology, threatening the family-oriented nation that it claims to build and becoming political opposition. In such a context, gender-related initiatives started to be seen as dangerous for the well-being of the departments and organizations which previously held space for them.

Increased Visibility of Gender-Related Work: Benefits and Drawbacks

The integration of gender-related work in mainstream politics has had ambivalent impacts on feminist academics and scholars, one of which is making feminist initiatives more visible and mobilizing the support of liberal and oppositional colleagues and students as well as international organizations. However, it has also resulted in less financial support for feminist activities and increased hostility towards feminist actors by the government-controlled media and far-right groups, which are likewise supported by the government.

New Allies – Positive Outcomes of Right-Wing Anti-Gender Regime

Aliza, who was in her 20s and was actively involved in feminist as well as LGBTQ activism in Budapest, explained that reaching out to wider audiences has been easier for her in the past few years. She said, "It's easier really. It's easier because when you are attacked by the

government people start to think about the topic and [...] we became more visible.” Many agreed with Aliza’s observation. For example, Teréz, who was involved in feminist activism since the 90s and was now a leader of one of the largest feminist organizations in Hungary, noticed higher engagement in the work of feminist organizations. She said that many organizations were surprised to see that “they [were] more supported than before [...], suddenly [they got] more Facebook followers, more likes, more visitors on the website”.

Dorina, who is a well-known feminist scholar in Hungary and internationally and is also one of the most outspoken critics of the illiberal regime of Fidesz’s government, noticed a similar trend in academia. According to her, “if you look at the academic feminism you see that this whole attack on gender studies improved their position and consolidated their position in the institutions.” She explained that because gender became a marker of a person’s “progressiveness,” many colleagues have become more open about including it as a topic in their work. Some of the universities became even more supportive of their gender scholars. Zoltán, a prominent LGBTQ activist who had also contributed to academic work and teaching about the issues of gender and sexuality, added that, while academic work, in general, is not of interest to the majority of the public or media, “now [...] some of these [gender-related] events are really full.” The integration of gender into mainstream politics has thus contributed to mobilizing support for various feminist causes.

Threats of Polarizing Visibility

The increased visibility of gender-related activist and academic work may indeed be an important step for wider outreach. However, the changes in public exposure have not always been experienced as positive. Alma, who had been teaching and researching gender at a

University in a smaller Hungarian town since the early 90s, outlined the ambivalent effects of the increased visibility on her work. She said,

All of a sudden, what we did within this institute, in the relatively protected but, at the same time, [...] for the wider context invisible way, all of a sudden, became visible. So as a kind of an eyesore for a lot of people. And it also meant that [anti-gender rhetoric served as a] justification that, for example, CEU which had a gender studies department, ceased to exist. So, this kind of delegitimization started.

Alma's response shows that lower visibility of gender-related work within a hostile context can provide some level of protection for scholars involved in the field. The visibility of their work has become an "eyesore" for those who support the system or prefer to stay under the governmental radar. In a context where having a Gender Studies program was used as an argument to delegitimize and shut down a whole university, as happened in the case of CEU, high exposure is not always beneficial. Alma explained that CEU's closure in Hungary put the gender scholars who were located at other universities in a difficult position. Their work was deemed illegitimate and worthless, making them vulnerable to further attacks.

As in academia, the high visibility of feminist work has affected the activist field in uncertain ways. The state-orchestrated politicization of the concept of gender, according to some respondents, made any conversation about gender-related issues highly polarizing and confrontational. Dorottya who had recently graduated from a PhD program in gender studies and was now teaching gender-related courses in Budapest explained, "[Gender] is just so heavily loaded that it's really hard to start a dialogue [...] around it because people who are anti-gender, they already just want to say this whole gender ideology and whatever and it's really hard to get in a dialogue." Dorottya's comment is a good example of how a right-wing climate can be polarizing. While it may indeed have helped feminist groups to gain support among liberally

inclined groups, the construction of gender as a “national threat” has also incited fear instead of fostering dialogue.

Lessening of Financial Support

Another negative impact of the right-wing anti-gender climate on feminist work has been limiting access to funding for feminist activists and academics. The so-called foreign agent’s law and the suspension of activities of the Norwegian Civic Fund, described in chapter 3, were significant “blows” to feminist organizations, as Teréz described it. In addition, the government’s official anti-gender stance limited feminist organizations’ access to governmental funding. According to respondents, governmental funding is usually channeled towards “NGOs who have good connections with the government” (Orsolya). These organizations were often referred to as GONGOs (Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations) by the participants. According to them, GONGOs usually support state-initiated policies and practices. In terms of gender-related work, this has often meant that instead of “gender equality [they worked] about family mainstreaming and family” (Orsolya). Most feminist organizations were able to survive the deprivation of financial support with the help of international organizations. Teréz explained that foundations from Western European countries started providing pools of funding for local NGOs. Funders who previously only supported bigger international human rights organizations, became more interested in feminist work. Teréz recalled that feminist organizations “were actually considering really tuning down [during the attacks], because [they] didn't have sources.”

However, governmental hostility still affected the nature of feminist work. According to Teréz, the climate made it “quite impossible [...] to have anything to do with the state actors basically.” This meant that feminist organizations couldn’t cooperate with the government about

many of the issues that they previously worked with, including improving legislation about gender-based violence and administering state-operated women's shelters. Many feminist organizations continued their work in campaigning against gender-based violence, providing legal and consulting services to women, and so on, but it was nearly impossible for them to advocate for larger systemic changes.

In academia, the atmosphere of hostility towards gender-related work was often given as a reason for participants to not pursue research or apply for funding in the area. Zoé, who was contemplating a Ph.D. program after completing her master's in Gender Studies, asked, "It's hard to get funding in academia anywhere and if you're writing about something related to feminism, is it going to be possible for you to get funding?" Zoé feared that if she focused on a gender-related subject in her future research, it would result in her lack of ability to acquire the necessary funding for her education and her research. This may be a big barrier to pursuing their goals for starting academics like Zoé. Dorottya's case was similar. Dorottya had recently graduated from a Gender Studies Ph.D. program and as a fresh graduate, she was trying to find ways of continuing with her work but was not hopeful about her prospects:

Now I probably won't be able to do research that I'm interested in, because they have the right to tell you what to do research about, or if you would get funding for it or not. So, this is another option that is closed off by now.

The expectation of not receiving support can influence the research or teaching of established scholars as well. According to participants, the majority of available research funding is controlled by the government, which discouraged researchers from applying. Lilla said,

As in any kind of non-democratic system you start to think about your opportunities early [...]. You wouldn't necessarily go ahead and make the noise because you know [...] the answer.

Scholars, like Lilla, who had been involved in gender-related research for over a decade, were now pushed to change their research direction or find creative ways of acquiring funding.

Media Attacks

According to participants, feminist actors often avoided “making noise” based on the fear that they would become targets of government-controlled media attacks. According to Lilla, there is no way to know if they will “pick something which you said or wrote or did, [...] eight years ago, ten years ago” and you will be called “someone who is doing this gender thing, which is not a science.” Some participants had already faced the consequences of increased hostility. For example, one of Alma’s students reported her to the dean for teaching “pseudo-science” and for “poisoning the minds of people” every week. Alma explained that the political hostility towards gender politics, or progressive politics in general, have motivated students to carry out attacks like this. She said that she and other academics could continue “doing what [they had] been doing for years” but “[they] had become a lot more vulnerable in all kinds of ways.”

Government-supporting media and far-right groups have been two major agents of instigating hatred towards gender scholars and activists. Feminist actors, both academic and activist, have been targeted by right-wing media systematically. Many of the participants of this research experienced being ridiculed, sworn at, and attacked on social media and by various media channels. Hungarian media is known to use tools such as creating various lists of public enemies, utilizing terms like “Soros Mercenaries,” or “foreign agents,” to expose individuals and mobilize public hatred against them (Maza, 2018). My research participants described media-organized campaigns against individuals or whole institutions as “character assassination” or “intimidation.” They also viewed these media attacks as an important “characteristic of the regime” (Etel). The experiences of participants reveal that these media attacks usually focus on a

person or group of people in very intimate ways, discrediting their work, mocking them, intimidating them directly or discrediting members of their families.

Alma's story of being attacked by the right-wing media provides a good example of how personal "intimidation" or "character assassination" can be carried out by the media. Alma organized a university-wide campaign supporting homeless women. She partnered with a local NGO and involved university students in planning and carrying out the initiative. The event was picked up by a local right-wing outlet, and a meme that presented Alma as a "mad feminist professor" was created and distributed over social media. Alma recalled,

The poster that we used was taken over and a meme was created of me saying that this gender mad professor is collecting these [...] and how mad she is. And of course, these comments came that, you know, I should be kind of prohibited to teach. I'm destroying these young, innocent, impressionable students and why I'm not disqualified and anyway...

Alma was surprised by the degree of violence and hatred expressed in the comments on social media posts. Her campaign to support homeless women was discredited as insanity, brought to Hungary by liberal gender ideologists, who instead of doing public good, corrupt young minds. She continued,

So, it started to kind of multiply [...] And my picture was there, and [...] I was named. [...] and there were these nasty comments. [...] They wrote things that, these [...] things should be kind of stuck up in my ass and vagina or whatever. I mean, the worst things you can imagine, the worst things.

The agitation over a small-scale campaign shows how right-wing media can construct any initiative as a threat to national safety. In this case, because there was a connection with the local NGO, the anti-gender, anti-liberal and anti-NGO sentiments could be mobilized together to create a moral panic. The NGO, Alma said, was "labelled as one of those Soros NGOs." And in Hungary, according to her, "that's any NGO whoever got some money either from the

Norwegian Fund or from Soros.” Thus, Alma’s interest in supporting women was depicted as irrational and as spreading dangerous gender ideologies, serving the interest of foreign funders like George Soros and contributing to the domination of global liberal values in Hungary.

The national safety discourse that depicts feminist actors as enemies often carries racist undertones as well. For example, Réka, a younger feminist activist who was in a leadership position at a large Budapest-based feminist organization working on the topic of gender-based violence, recalled how she was featured on a right-wing website:

There were these caricatures of all these blacklisted NGOs and the people in them. [The website asked:] “Can we finally admit that all these Soros soldiers are Jews?” [...] They inserted pictures of a few people from four or five organizations, that they think look like Jews and I was one of those people.

As noted in chapter 3, the anti-Soros campaign relied on a conspiracy of George Soros being a powerful Jew who controls the world. In this campaign, local civil society actors affiliated with him were also constructed as enemies, depicted not only as liberal but also as Jewish. Thus, in this depiction, traditionalist and racist ideologies of Fidesz-promoted nationalism came together to discredit Réka and other activists. Alma’s and Réka’s examples are good illustrations that government-controlled media in Hungary is an important tool for spreading governmental discourses of anti-genderism, nationalism and racism and discrediting the work of the actors deemed to be governmental opposition.

The closure of the MA program in Gender Studies was preceded by a similar media smear campaign as well. The government’s intention to close the program was revealed only after a year of media-orchestrated attacks on the program. Etel, a well-established feminist scholar who played a central role in the founding of the first Hungarian-language Gender Studies MA program in 2017, remembered that the “first round of attacks” started a few months after the program was announced. These first attacks were carried out by the media. They questioned the

scientific value of the program and presented it as a dangerous attempt at brainwashing students with gender ideology. According to Etel, this first media campaign was most likely sanctioned by the government. She said,

I think there was a very clear governmental will and governmental scrutiny behind this but at this point, they didn't get involved directly in this process. [...] In the first round they sent their dogs. In their dogs I mean those civil organizations, media, obviously. But I don't think it was accidental.

Etel continued that media campaigns framed gender studies as a discipline that is “about toilets and creating the third gender.” Their discourses neatly fit the narratives described as “anti-gender” in this dissertation. The story of the closure of Gender Studies in Hungary is a demonstration of how the government can utilize media in order to steer public opinion and prepare the ideological ground for larger-scale institutional changes.

Far-Right Attacks

Attacks from far-right groups, which had intensified during Fidesz's government, were identified as another important barrier for research participants in carrying out their work. According to participants, these groups disrupted various community events, intimidated feminist or queer communities, and published the names and faces of community organizers with degrading commentary. In some cases, they went after individuals and tried to disrupt their careers or lives by contacting their employers and “revealing” their affiliation with “anti-Hungarian” causes. Some activists and, more recently, academics received personal threats regularly, including threats to their lives through social media platforms. These attacks, combined with the absence of a state response to far-right violence, impacted activist and academic fields. They made it difficult for community organizers to plan and continue their work, engage communities, and ensure their safety. Historically, in Hungary, right-wing groups have targeted LGBTQ communities, organizations, and events more than feminist ones.

However, more recently, the strong anti-gender climate has encouraged attacks on groups working on more traditional gender issues as well. This is why a lot of examples in this section discuss LBTQ or LGBTQ events and organizations; however, there are also a few examples involving gender scholars and activists.

When I asked about barriers to his work, Zoltán, an LGBTQ organizer, responded that one of the major disturbances was the far-right groups:

It's really nasty that now with every event you have to think: "can we expect these groups to show up"? "Do I have a security guard to keep them out if they come"? "If they just want to talk, do we let them in"? If we don't let them in, then they claim that we are censoring them. So, it really takes a lot of energy from organizing the events.

Zoltán's response shows that not only were these groups actively disturbing community work and events but they also became a significant concern for the organizers. Dealing with far-right group attacks became an important aspect of their work. Political and large-scale events, such as Budapest Pride, have been targeted by far-right groups since their establishment, but the current political regime has encouraged them to attack smaller-scale, social and community events as well. According to Zoltán, "they [even] show[ed] up at speed dates and things like that."

In addition to disrupting community events, far-right groups have often intimidated individual participants of various LGBTQ or feminist activities as well. Hanna, a feminist and LBT activist working at a lesbian women-centered non-profit, recalled how far-right groups would secretly video-record their events and upload edited videos online to discredit LGBTQ and feminist groups and their politics. Such documentation of queer or feminist events also meant that participants' faces and personal information became public knowledge. They were

put out on various right-wing platforms as “bad examples,” and violence against individuals was encouraged.

Márta, a PhD graduate from Gender Studies who was involved in feminist and a queer organizing and worked closely with Hanna, recalled that a teacher who attended an LGBTQ event for educators was targeted at one of their events. She said that George Budahazi, a far-right leader, “found out where [the teacher] worked and wrote a letter to the school director.” The letter argued for letting go of the teacher “because he [was] gay.” These examples show that feminist or LGBTQ actors are increasingly vulnerable to right-wing attacks in contemporary Hungary. Their careers or personal lives can be targeted and exposed, their reputations may be destroyed, and their daily activities might be affected. These attacks have created fear and an expectation of constant scrutiny.

Many respondents also stated that far-right groups are supported by the state. For example, Hanna claimed that even when the behaviour of right-wing groups was violent and she called the police, they were never adequately punished. State support of right-wing causes was present, even in such extreme cases as death threats. Dorina, who is a famous gender scholar and public figure in Hungary, shared a story of receiving death threats online. She informed the police. She tried to get the prosecutor’s office to investigate the case and ensure adequate protection for her, but her attempts were unsuccessful. She said that the state departments such as police or prosecution ignored her case despite “a concrete example [of] receiving a death threat that somebody want[ed] to kill [her].”

The fear and vulnerability created by far-right attacks have important consequences for activists and academics. According to Zoltán, in activist contexts, this may result in difficulties

involving the community in organizational activities. It also may require organizers to put extra resources into ensuring safety and anonymity. He said,

Volunteers might say: “no, I don’t want this anymore”. So, they just stop volunteering with us. Clients may be discouraged. Maybe we have to have counselling meetings somewhere else, that will cost money...so it does make life difficult.

Like Zoltán, Márta also explained that the attack on one of the teachers who participated in their educational project created fear amongst others. She said, “some of them got really scared and they never came back because it's terrifying.” Thus, the disruptions of singular events or attacks on individuals have lasting consequences on the work of civil society, as they make it difficult to work with beneficiaries, maintain the privacy of clients/volunteers, or provide services.

This section has discussed the impacts of the right-wing and anti-gender climate on the lives and work of feminist scholars and activists. The anti-gender climate has increased the visibility of feminist work, which has resulted in increased support from left-leaning groups for feminist causes. However, it has had multiple negative impacts on participants as well, including making them more vulnerable, lessening financial support for their work, and increasing attacks from media and far-right groups.

Coping With the Right-Wing and Anti-Gender Climate

As shown above, the right-wing anti-gender climate has substantially changed the lives and work of feminist scholars and activists, who have had to find ways to survive within and cope with the hostile environment. Below, I discuss the ways in which my respondents have adapted to this new political regime. My findings show that many feminist actors, especially those who had stronger institutional support, continue to openly confront the regime. Others,

however, have had to resort to self-censorship or use strategic language in order to survive and continue with their work. Strategies of using careful language for achieving particular, goal-oriented results can best be described by the concept of “strategic essentialism,” developed by Gayatri Spivak. Finally, many of my respondents found it difficult to imagine their futures in right-wing Hungary. These participants had already left the country or were planning to do so.

Continuing With One’s Own Path

There's no way of not going on. I don't think any of my colleagues refrains from saying practically anything. What is more, some of them have become even more open about things. And I know that some of them actually are perhaps even more challenging students' prejudices since these things are happening because we feel responsible to our students. They consider it their duty to do so. (Alma)

Alma’s words show that dedication to one’s discipline and its principles, as well as dedication to teaching, have been central for her and her colleagues. The repressive political climate, according to her, has catalyzed the activist spirit in academia, where teaching free thought to students started to be seen as one’s responsibility and duty. Dorina noted that she has integrated more creative work encouraging free-thinking in her teaching and research. She said that within a political climate that represses one’s independent thought and expression, it is central to encourage students to open up in creative ways.

Many participants expressed feeling strongly about continuing their research and academic paths, despite institutional challenges. Gábor, for example, said that he is a fighter and will continue to fight changes initiated by the government at the university where he works while he can. According to him, even if he gets fired, “no one can control [him] to send [his] publications to [an English Language Journal].” Etel, another feminist scholar, told me that she decided to apply for a higher rank of professorship at the Academy of Sciences with her work on gender after the attacks on the MA program in Gender Studies. She said, “We cannot provide

MA degree in Gender Studies, but I teach my subjects, I do my research.” For her, applying for a higher rank with her research was a kind of a challenge to the Hungarian academic system, a test of its independence.

Like in academia, feminist organizations have dealt with the institutional and legal restrictions imposed by the government differently. According to Zoltán, the infamous “foreign agents” law required revealing not only funding sources but also lists of organizational staff and volunteers to the government. While some organizations decided to cooperate and avoid additional legal trouble, others, especially those working with vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQ communities, decided to oppose the legislation and instead pay the fines. Many feminist activists continued their engagement in oppositional actions despite experiencing governmental surveillance and being unjustly prosecuted. For example, Piroska a younger feminist activist, who had worked in various human rights organizations as well as received an MA in gender studies recently, was arrested for her actions twice—once for writing over governmental posters and another for organizing a feminist performance that was deemed an offence to religious feelings by the prosecution. Reflecting on these instances, Piroska said that the state “just wanted to frighten [them],” and, indeed, years of investigation and court hearings were not easy for her. However, she said that she stayed a member of feminist groups despite the state’s attempts to instill fear in dissenting voices.

Still, the courage to remain openly confrontational to state ideologies or the changes initiated by them is often grounded in one’s feeling of safety about a professional or social position. Gábor explained that he can more easily get away with his focus on gender because he represents a more mainstream and traditional discipline:

I’m lucky enough that although I am a gender scholar, my position is legitimate because I represent traditional scholarships, like history of sociology, social

stratification, sociology of culture, sociological theory, and I'm the one who is teaching for bachelor, master, and Ph.D. levels the sociological theory which is an important issue. So, in this respect, I'm in a safe position.

While for Gábor, it is his base in traditional disciplines that has provided a sense of security, for Piroška, it is her social and professional connections. She explained that large human rights organizations provided legal counselling and help for her throughout her case. Being a member of a wider human rights network has often given activists access to legal and social support that others do not have.

Self-Censorship and Strategic Language

Despite a hostile climate, cases of direct censorship were relatively rare amongst my participants. However, according to Ildikó, who is a well-known researcher of sexuality in Hungary and internationally since the 90s, the fear of being attacked, defunded or dismissed for one's work has resulted in the prevalence of self-censorship among Hungarian academics. She said,

Everyone is in a limbo [...] and of course, I mean we know that from psychology that when there is this danger of censorship also you do start self-censorship, and this is already happening. People [are] saying, perhaps we should not put gender there and stuff like that.

Similarly, Dorina, another well-known Hungarian gender scholar, also discussed personal encounters with self-censoring colleagues. According to her, some of her former colleagues had voluntarily changed their syllabi and courses before they were even asked. According to her, the hostile political climate started a “very interesting bordering” process, where some academics would avoid being affiliated with colleagues with whom they previously worked. According to participants, an awareness of experiences of other colleagues who were targeted by right-wing propaganda often had a chilling effect on others. Quite a few respondents mentioned the case of

Andrea Kozáry, a researcher working on hate speech, including anti-LGBTQ and anti-immigrant sentiments. Andrea was fired from her department for political reasons. Her work about hate speech was deemed to be liberal brainwashing and anti-Hungarian. Such cases, according to Alma, have increased the vulnerability of academics “in all kinds of ways.”

The atmosphere of self-censorship and fear was seen by participants as harmful to scholars who were trying to continue with their work in this hostile environment. Ildikó recalled that she was asked by her colleagues to not work on confrontational topics such as gender and sexuality. She said that she was feeling “sad and lonely” in the research institution that had previously supported and encouraged her work. Despite her disappointment, Ildikó was understanding of those who couldn’t confront the system as openly due to fear of losing their jobs or careers. She said, “most of [my colleagues] are really afraid and I cannot blame them. They have children, they have to pay the rent.”

While self-censorship was discussed by participants as something observed in others, most of the respondents in this research did not think they censored themselves. However, employing “coded language” (Alma) or “strategic renaming” (Ildikó) was often discussed as a way of achieving one’s goals. Ildikó mentioned that in order to get funding, scholars would sometimes carry out gender-related research but describe it as a study focusing on the labour market. Zoé, a recent graduate of the Gender Studies MA program, said that she would do a Ph.D. in another discipline but focus on gender research. According to her, the circumstances were limited but sometimes “you just [had] to go get it.”

Examples of so-called “strategic renaming” were common amongst feminist activist groups as well. For example, Sena, a younger feminist organizer who worked at a Human rights

non-profit after completing an MA in gender studies, remembered avoiding the word “feminist” in the title of the event she organized with her colleagues:

We are going to organize a feminist film club. But it's a strange thing that we are not going to call it a feminist film club because we think that if we call it feminist, many people wouldn't come, even if they like the movie and they would like the conversation after it.

Even if Sena found it “strange” to rename an activity and take the word “feminist” out of it, such a move was a strategy for wider outreach to her.

Some participants noted exploiting the possibility to appeal to traditionalist and family values advocated by the government in order to achieve specific goals. For example, Klára argued that instead of antagonizing the government’s attempts to mainstream family values, feminists could engage in “reframing the situation.” She said,

we should have our own agenda and work accordingly and speak up and to say about sexual harassment and speak about wage-gap [...] and to try to be loud and explicit and in this way maybe you can contribute to reframing the public speech.

Klára also shared an example of such reframing of the public discourse. She attempted to insert a feminist agenda when she was invited to speak at an event dedicated to discussing the demographic decline in Hungary. She explained, “you cannot speak about demographic changes without gender relations, [...] so I [accepted the invitation] to talk about gender inequalities in demographic processes”.

Zoé brought an example of employing the language of family in a project that required some level of governmental cooperation. Zoé was overseeing a project that advocated for raising care allowances for those caring for the sick or elderly and also for the mothers of disabled children. She explained,

It's a really good method because it worked and that's how community organization works. We took the government's narrative of 2018 being the year of

the family and we said: “hey, this is a family who are doing work basically for the state and they aren't getting paid enough, do you still care about families”?

In this case, Zoé's organization argued that increasing care allowances was the government's duty in order to ensure the wellbeing of families. According to Zoé, framing the issue in these terms helped them to achieve their goals. Zoé explained, when dealing with a campaign with a specific goal, “you need allies from the government side as well.” She believed that if she had framed the issue of domestic labour in feminist terms, “the government wouldn't want to have an alliance with [them].”

These examples are useful illustrations of Spivak's “strategic essentialism,” a temporary strategy by which marginalized groups can invoke solidarity and achieve specific, short-term goals. In her early writings, Spivak introduced the idea of strategic essentialism in the context of discussing the importance of reclaiming one's history and culture by subaltern historiographers against colonial erasures. According to her, claims to coherent subaltern identities reinstated essentialist reading of culture as well as a subaltern subject. However, it was also a “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Spivak, 2006, 281). For Spivak, creating such narratives were necessary to counter colonial narratives erasing the rich history of the post-colonial world. Since then, the concept of strategic essentialism has been taken up and applied to various circumstances. In the context of this research, the participants utilized gender essentialisms such as emphasizing the role of motherhood, engaging in the conversations about heterosexual families and demography or strategically using the concepts such as women instead of gender or feminism. The effectiveness of using such essentialisms has been harshly debated among feminists. According to Eide (2016) strategic essentialism can be important in achieving short-term goals but can have significant shortcomings, as it does not challenge the systems of dominance or the root causes of inequality. Susan Abraham (2009, 157)

states that the use of essentialism in a feminist context “runs the danger of being co-opted by nationalist agendas that seek to construct national identity through idealized and hyperfeminized retrievals of femininity”. Eide (2016) also argues, that emphasizing female essence or women’s nurturing character in the attempts to advocate for specific rights, such as parental leave or equal representation, could be exclusionary for minority groups within the category of women, such as trans and lesbian women. According to Pande (2017), in the later years of her career, Spivak herself denounced strategic essentialism as a useful political strategy for its capacity to overlook the importance of deconstructive reading of various categories and for being used to justify various essentialist political projects.

In the examples described above, the strategies used by participants were effective in outlining the needs of mostly white, heterosexual women and mothers but erased others. For example, discussions about demographic issues in Hungary could have a feminist angle, but they still focus on reproducing the white Hungarian nation and depict women as responsible for doing so. Zoé herself explained that during the project, she and her colleagues needed to be “really careful” with language and representation so as not to irritate the government. This meant that feminist and queer people like herself had to move to the background. She said, “I’m not the face [of the organization], the faces [...] have to be in their mother roles and that’s how it works.” She also admitted that while the project was successful overall, the care allowance was raised substantially more for mothers who were taking care of their children than for those who were taking care of sick or elderly relatives.

Zoé, like some of the other participants quoted above, was explicit about the strategic use of essentialisms for specific, short-term goals. However, she was also critical of the implications they may have had for broader feminist agenda. I distinguish these “strategically essentialist”

tactics from the claims characteristic to anti-gender feminist discourse discussed in the following chapter. Spivak defines strategic essentialism as a political strategy which balances between the importance of achievable political goals and the foreseen harms of essentialist approaches. It is strategic insofar as it is aware of strategically using essentialist arguments for the short term. According to Pande (2017, 2) it is a “constitutive paradox” of strategic essentialism to mobilize essentialist categories while at the same time seeking their deconstruction for transformative political goals. Unlike the strategic essentialist practices described by Zoé or Sena, the broader feminist discourse that has gained dominance in Hungarian feminist circles and which I call anti-gender feminism, is explicitly opposed to deconstructive readings of the categories of gender and women. Anti-gender feminist discourse emerged as a strategy to respond to the right-wing anti-gender accusations. However, as I demonstrate in Chapter 5, it does not hold space for alternative, less essentialist readings of gender.

Leaving Hungary

Many participants expressed their frustration with and exhaustion from living in a hostile climate, which has led them to emigrate or plan to emigrate from Hungary. Even the respondents who didn't plan to immigrate themselves discussed how activists and academics are leaving Hungary, making the already weak feminist field even weaker. Ildikó who had been researching non-normative sexualities in Hungary for most of her professional career, explained her decision to move out of the country:

They never forbade me anything. But we had a manager who [...] said that feminist sociology doesn't exist. [...] I was like: “that’s not exactly how I see things” and basically, I started looking at new places, opportunities to leave. I really wanted to get out of this institutional environment I have to say. [...] it became quite clear that this is going in a very strange direction.

Ildikó's comments show how the new political climate in Hungary made it clear to her that her work would not be valued anymore. Even if Ildikó's work was not directly censored, the knowledge of a changing political climate was reason enough for her to decide to leave. She described her life during Fidesz's government as "almost unbearable" and said that she was "looking for a place to hide from Orbán". Ildikó didn't leave Hungary for new and exciting opportunities for her work. Rather, she had to find an administrative position to get by in a new country and could only do research during her free time. Despite this, she still described her time away as a "pleasant distance from Hungary". Ildikó's story illustrates how feminist scholars often decide to leave Hungary not only because of barriers to their work but also because of the general hateful context and a need to take care of one's mental wellbeing. The difficult choice to leave one's often-successful career and established life behind demonstrates the heavy impact the right-wing climate has on many feminist actors. For most of my participants, it was not an easy or light-hearted decision. For example, Anina, who was involved in feminist and queer activism in Budapest for the better part of her life, was planning to emigrate to another country together with her partner. She told me,

We want to leave. We want to do something somewhere. And we are not young, I'm 44, [my partner is] 45 and in a normal setting this age would find us in a different position. But we are actually re-inventing ourselves. I don't mind it, but I also mind it.

Anina's words show that a change of life and career is not easy for many of those affected and antagonized by Fidesz's regime. As she said, it is not always easy or desirable to have to "re-invent" oneself in a different country. Even while saying she doesn't mind finding a new life and career path, Anina also stressed that she would ideally expect to have a more settled life at her age. Immigration often involves sacrifices, such as leaving behind the life one built, distancing oneself from family and friends, and adjusting to a new environment (Levenbach &

Lewak, 1995). For Anina, as well as for many others, the mental load of living in right-wing Hungary becomes heavier than the difficulties of starting a new life. Immigration is one way to cope with the mental load of the repressive regime.

In this chapter, I have discussed the impacts of the right-wing and anti-gender climate in Hungary for feminist activists and academics, and I have outlined their main strategies for coping with the regime. I have argued that the anti-gender regime of Fidesz's government has changed the social and political positioning of feminist actors and depicted them as threats to the nation, political opponents to the government, and dangers to their professional collectives. Such politicization of feminist work has increased support for feminist causes amongst left-leaning colleagues, departments, and students, but it has also resulted in limited funding support for feminist academic and activist work and made them vulnerable to media and right-wing attacks. Feminist actors have mainly dealt with the hostile political climate by openly confronting governmental discourse or by resorting to the strategic use of language or self-censorship. Many, however, have dealt with the emotional toll of and their frustrations with the regime by leaving Hungary.

Chapter 5: The Emergence of Anti-Gender Feminism

Vilma and I met in a typical rustic-looking café in downtown Budapest. I was early for the meeting, so I was already sipping my loose-leaf, herb-infused tea when she arrived. Before I had even turned on the recorder, we started to chat. We talked about climate change, the elitist nature of academia, and the impacts of the neoliberal economy on Hungary and its people. We talked about the importance of not dismissing right-wing anti-gender movements as simple manifestations of patriarchy and the need to understand their emergence in context-informed and structural terms. It felt nice to connect with a respondent so easily. It seemed that we were on the same page about multiple issues, we had developed a good rapport, and the interview would be a pleasant exploration of the context I was so interested in. After going over the consent form and starting to record, I asked my first question. I asked Vilma to tell me about herself, her feminist past and present. She responded: “I usually define myself as an anti-pornography activist and my focus is the abolition of the institution of prostitution and the industry of pornography.” I was visibly surprised. I was surprised because Vilma’s critical and nuanced politics did not quite match with the image of a typical, second-wave-ish, sex-negative feminist I had constructed in my mind. Her politics and analysis were more complex than the caricature of radical feminists we are often presented with in North America (for a critical discussion on the constructions of a linear progress narrative of the feminist typology from “essentialist” second-wave feminists, to the sex-wars and to the “difference-oriented” 90s, see Hemmings, 2005).

The interview with Vilma was only one example of my consistent experience of surprise and confusion during fieldwork. During the majority of my interviews, participants and I were on the same page in analyzing global economic and symbolic hierarchies. I would agree with their critical take on the hierarchical relationships between Western and non-Western feminisms. I

would nod enthusiastically when they talked about the importance of avoiding simplistic explanations of the right-wing climate in Hungary as a result of its “backwardness” or “patriarchal culture.” Still, it was difficult for me to understand how this analysis led to the arguments articulated by many of the same participants. They often claimed that Hungarian feminism should center on the “average,” and thus white, ethnically Hungarian and middle-class woman to counter right-wing and anti-gender ideologies, that it should distance itself from trans rights movements because trans rights contribute to the right-wing agenda, or that supporting sex workers would mean complying with the interests of Western European men to exploit Hungarian women. Over the course of my fieldwork, I learned that these feminist perspectives escaped simplistic binaries such as second wave vs. third (or fourth) wave, Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) vs. trans-inclusive feminist, sex-positive vs. sex-negative, white women vs. women of colour, or liberal vs. leftist. Mapping and analyzing these perspectives required a rethinking of these binaries and analyzing the feminist movement in Hungary on its own terms and in relation to its local context.

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that Hungary’s hostile, right-wing, anti-gender and populist-authoritarian regime has affected feminist academics and activists in various ways. Namely, it has affected their social and political positioning, financial support for feminist organizations, and the ability to speak up or continue the work they have been doing. It has created hostility towards all feminist initiatives by defining gender as dangerous and as a threat to the future or very existence of Hungarian society. The difficulties experienced under the right-wing regime have required feminist actors to re-strategize and find ways of persevering within a hostile context. In addition to immediate coping strategies, adopted by research participants and

described in the previous chapter, discussions about longer-term strategic ways of evading anti-gender accusations have been at the core of the debates within and among feminist groups.

Two major topics have dominated feminist debates in Hungary for the past 5-7 years: trans inclusion and sex work. These debates were described as intense, hostile and divisive by participants. The debates among Hungarian feminists partially were reflections of similar debates transnationally (see Bettio et al., 2017 and Gerassi, 2015 for feminist debates on sex work and Elliot, 2009 and Hines, 2020 on trans inclusion). However, at the same time, the arguments articulated by participants were informed by a strong desire to survive within and counter the right-wing and anti-gender climate in Hungary. It is through these contexts that the contours of a complex and new feminist discourse that I call “anti-gender feminism” emerged in my research.

In this chapter, I argue that the hostile attacks on feminist actors through right-wing anti-gender discourse have created a fertile ground for anti-gender feminism. Anti-gender feminism is a feminist discourse aimed at reforming the feminist movement in Hungary so that it survives the right-wing context. As shown in Chapter 3, two core right-wing anti-gender claims in Hungary are that (1) gender ideology turns men into women, and vice versa, and (2) feminism is a Western-imposed liberal ideology. In order to counter these accusations, anti-gender feminism defines gender as an analytic category that describes hierarchies between men and women and grounds itself in Marxist and leftist frameworks while taking a west-critical perspective. Anti-gender feminism further distances itself from criticism by reaching out to the “common people” and representing the needs of “average women,” so that it can evade the accusation of serving the interests of small liberal elites. This strong focus on gaining wider public support for the feminist cause in anti-gender feminist discourse, however, prioritizes the needs of heterosexual, cisgender and white Hungarian women at the expense of more politically and socially volatile

struggles, such as trans inclusion and sex workers' rights. Finally, anti-gender feminist discourse positions itself as a break from older, "liberal" modes of feminism and is presented as a new, critical, and more progressive perspective.

To illustrate my argument, in this chapter, I discuss various facets of anti-gender feminism that emerged in the descriptions of feminist debates over trans inclusion and sex work by my participants. First, I discuss one of the central features of anti-gender feminism, which is its investment in defining the concept of gender in a way that counters right-wing accusations that gender ideology is a trojan horse slowly destroying the nation's future. Second, I talk about the leftist underpinnings of anti-gender feminist discourse. Next, I explain how anti-gender feminism aims to present itself as a feminist movement that addresses the needs of the majority of women and, in doing so, separates itself from trans and sex workers' struggles. Finally, I discuss how anti-gender feminist discourse has gained dominance within Hungarian feminist circles by asserting itself as a new and a more critical feminist perspective.

In shaping my arguments, I rely on participants' reflections about countering the right-wing climate and the arguments articulated in relation to the two central issues of debate within the Hungarian feminist circles: trans inclusion and sex work.

"Feminism is Anti-Gender"

When I hear [...] anti-gender, I'm always a little bit dissatisfied. I know this is the way it's called,⁴ but in my opinion, *feminism is anti-gender*.⁵ The very point of feminism is that we don't want gender roles, [...] we want to eliminate gender roles. (Teréz)

⁴ Right-wing discourse on gender ideology

⁵ My Italics

Teréz's reflections helped me term the new, self-identified leftist perspective dominating Hungarian feminism thought "anti-gender feminism." According to Teréz, who, as stated in the previous chapter, is a long-time feminist organizer leading one of the largest women's organizations in Budapest, feminism is anti-gender in that it tries to eliminate gender roles associated with gendered hierarchies that disadvantage women. In Teréz's definition, calling the right-wing state actors anti-gender, is problematic, because they are the ones trying to maintain patriarchal gender norms. Feminists, on the other hand, want to eliminate asymmetrical gender roles, making feminism an anti-gender perspective. Réka, another feminist activist, similarly argued that right-wing nationalists want to preserve traditional gender roles and hierarchies between men and women, while feminists want to abolish them; this line of thinking positions feminist, not right-wing, actors as being anti-gender. "It is them who is in gender-craze, we want to abolish gender," Réka said. Thus, unlike right-wing anti-gender discourse, anti-gender feminism wants to eliminate gender inequalities instead of maintaining patriarchal structures.

However, in participant definitions of anti-gender feminism, gender was conceptualized as an analytic concept for critiquing inequalities between men and women. Defining gender in this way was central to anti-gender feminist discourse as articulated by many of my participants, and it was often contrasted with the understanding of gender as a term that can signal one's identity. Teréz continued:

Gender now is postulated [...] really massively [...] as an inborn thing. You are born as a man and you think like a man, [...] and you were born with the body of a woman, so you have to change that. [...] And feminism says, you are not born with a gender. You are trained to be one gender or the other, and everybody is basically dysphoric in this sense, especially women. Dysphoric in a sense because every woman suffers from the constraints that rigid gender expectations put on them.

In Teréz's definition, feminism understands gender to signal hierarchical societal roles that are distributed among biological men and women. Piroška, another feminist activist and a younger scholar expressed similar sentiments:

Piroška: An approach where identity is inborn and gender is inborn is not compatible with feminism. Gender for feminism is a social hierarchy it cannot be born with you. [...]

Anna: But if all identities are constructed, I am really not understanding...

Piroška: It depends on your physical body and, of course, whether you are able to be pregnant or whether you are able to impregnate others [...]. And of course, socialization and all that kind of stuff does matter.

Like Teréz, Piroška also insisted that feminism is only compatible with understanding gender as a social hierarchy and not as an inborn identity. Piroška's understanding of the social hierarchies of gender is also explicitly based on biological notions of womanhood, such as reproductive capacity and anatomy, indicating that differences between men and women are often conceptualized in essentialist terms within anti-gender feminist discourse.

The participants who supported this position usually accused trans rights of being a discourse of essentialism. Usually, trans rights were seen as essentialist "identity politics" while the feminist perspective was presented as a stance that understood gender to be socially constructed. Szandra, who is a younger feminist activist and was working on her PhD dissertation about women and sex work at the time of the interview, explained to me the difference between the so-called "identity politics" and feminist perspective:

It is coming from the definition of gender, if you see gender as a structural, societal thing. That when a girl or a boy is born, through socialization and through social institutions what roles we give to them, and how we base the hierarchy between them. So we don't think that gender is something which is coming from the inside, or from the brain [...] it's not an individual decision. [...] and what we call identity politics is when gender is framed as individual choice.

Szandra's description of identity politics equates identity politics to a stance where gender is understood to be an individual decision and something inborn. Thus, her critique of identity politics is primarily the critique of particular strands of trans rights discourse, understood as essentialist by her (gender is inborn). Feminists, on the contrary, Szandra claimed, should see gender as structural and societal. Her description is symptomatic of the anti-gender feminist discourse I encountered throughout my research. Not only does Szandra's comment demonstrate how identity politics is often conflated with transness in Hungarian feminist discourse, but it also shows how this discourse projects the blame of essentialism back onto the trans movement. In her words, feminist scholars and activists see gender as socially constructed, while trans activists claim that gender is an identity that is inborn and thus essential.

The claim that anti-gender feminist arguments are constructivist while trans arguments are essentialist offers a reductive reading of trans movements, and at the same time, it overlooks the fact that anti-gender feminism seamlessly links gendered upbringing to gendered bodies. Anti-gender feminist discourse blames all trans rights movements for defining gender as something inborn. While understanding transness as a differently gendered mind being trapped into a wrong body is indeed part of some popular trans-rights discourses, generalizing this argument as a central discourse of all trans-inclusive activism ignores heterogeneity and multiplicity of trans movements and experience as well as their political potential. As Mieke Verloo and Anna Van der Vleuten, (2020, 223) argue, it is central to trans rights projects to challenge "the binary sex categories and the social and political allocation of people to these categories". Discussing trans experience, according to them, makes it visible how essentialized sex categories are social constructions and sheds light on the reasons of gender hierarchies. What is more, drawing on Maria Lugones's and other decolonial scholars' work, Alyoxa Tudor (2021,

245) reminds us that “the modern binary heteronormative sex/gender system [...] was imported through colonialism” in multiple places of the world and thus a truly decolonial gender studies is always already “trans”. Such a reading of transness, according to Tudor could bring together concerns over race, colonialism and gender that gender scholarship has been grappling with.

While claiming trans rights discourse of essentialism, anti-gender feminism claims that it proposes a socially constructivist understanding of gender. In part this is true, as within anti-gender feminist discourse gender was understood as something that is related to the hierarchical social norms of femininity imposed on women. However, anti-gender feminism was resistant of deconstructing biological sex as socially constructed as well and privileged the binary sex/gender model. Pirooska’s description of the importance of the physical body for defining womanhood is a good example of this. Szandra herself claimed elsewhere in the interview that “a lot of girls from poverty get trafficked in prostitution when they are 12 years old because they have a vagina and no more reason. They don't have any other identity.” These comments show, once again, that although anti-gender feminists insist on defining gender as related to social structures and blame trans rights discourse of essentialism, the normatively sexed body is central to anti-gender definitions of womanhood.

Such debates over definitions of gender and womanhood are not new for feminist movements. In the late-1980s, we witnessed discussions over sex/gender with the emergence of post-structuralist arguments in feminist theory. Judith Butler’s (1988) provocative argument that both sex and gender are socially constructed, or Anne Fausto-Sterling’s (1993, 2000) proposal to think of sex beyond its dual character, were criticized by others insisting on the importance of sexual difference (Braidotti & Butler, 1994) or more practical feminist theorizing (Nussbaum, 1999). There were debates between the so-called First World and Third World feminists over

defining womanhood as well. Post-colonial feminist theory contested the universalist definitions of womanhood and patriarchal oppression that were predominant in First World feminist discourses. It advocated for more nuanced local perspectives for analyzing women's issues in the Third World, which considered the impacts of colonialism, race and social class and escaped the Orientalizing western gaze (McLeod, 2010, 124-127; Mohanty, 1997). Debates over trans inclusion have also been ongoing in feminist movements worldwide since the 60s and the 70s. Over the last decade, these debates have become even more visible in the public domain due to the confrontations between the so-called TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) and trans-inclusive feminist perspectives on social media. Within these debates, those identifying as “radical feminists” claim that womanhood is defined by one's anatomical body and others support less biologically grounded definitions of sex/gender (Elliot, 2009; Hines, 2020; McQueen, 2016).

Thus, it was not surprising to see similar debates and arguments reproduced in the feminist movement in Hungary. However, I was not expecting the level of emotional and political investment in these debates from the majority of my participants. This was especially true since many participants had claimed the trans movement is weak and invisible in Hungary and had not really initiated the changes that some participants saw as harmful to feminism. For example, Orsolya claimed the trans movement was dangerous because it supported the transition of younger children. She claimed feminists were fighting to assure women that they “should be happy with [their] body” and “love “themselves” while trans movements were supporting “women [...] cutting off their breasts.”

Meanwhile, the most debated topics amongst Hungarian feminists, such as hormone therapy, the use of bathrooms, and the use of pronouns, were not on the agenda of the Hungarian

trans movement during my fieldwork. The central issue of trans organizing at that time was advocacy for allowing legal gender recognition, which was being carried out quietly and under the radar. Dézi, a trans activist and a leader of one of the few Trans rights organizations in Hungary, said they were surprised by the debates among feminist actors, as they were “discussions on the academic level on identity politics and whatever,” not relevant to the struggles and conversations within the trans movement in the country. Dézi said, “I was just [...] wondering: ‘Is this your biggest problem really on earth to argue on that? Like there's no other thing to do when you are feminists in this country?’”

It was also surprising that many participants who insisted on defining gender as a hierarchy between men and women were not primarily concerned with “defending” all-female spaces from trans participants. Instead, it was the discourse of gender signifying one’s identity that they wanted to oppose. For example, Teréz was open to having trans women volunteer for the women’s organization where she worked. Szandra claimed, “I have no problems with individuals,” but “I don't think that we can base policies on [the idea] that gender is an individual choice.” To signify this difference, they would use the concept “transcritical” and distinguish it from “transphobic,” with “transcritical” signifying the critique of understanding gender as a changeable identity and “transphobic” signifying hatred towards trans individuals.

The insistence of some feminists to define gender as a hierarchical division between men and women while simultaneously arguing against so-called trans politics and not trans people can be explained if we understand it as a strategy to counter the right-wing definitions of gender ideology. Katalin, a younger feminist activist and a scholar of social science, who had gotten involved in feminist work more recently than other participants, explained to me,

There was an important change and that's related [...] to the meaning of gender. [...] I think the government was really successful in building the impression that

gender means gender identity. And this is not what trans activists have done in Hungary, because there are so few of them and they are so scared, that they don't have that much of an impact. But the government has.

In this comment, Katalin directly relates the shift in the meaning of gender to the government's anti-gender propaganda, which defined gender ideology as a threat to the changing societal structure by destabilizing notions of manhood and womanhood and not to the trans movement. Thus, in Hungary, it is the politics of understanding gender as a shifting identity that threatens feminists, not local trans people. In this context, Teréz's accusation that trans movements are complicit with the government's right-wing agenda starts to make sense. Teréz said that it is unfortunate that "the trans identity movements who consider themselves extremely progressive [...] actually feed into the narrative of the extreme right." According to her, nationalist anti-genderists and trans movements claim the same thing—that gender can be misaligned with biological sex—and such a claim undermines feminist goals.

The importance of not defining gender as a shifting identity was also exemplified through a web page created by one of the oldest and most influential organizations in the country, the Hungarian Women's Lobby. The organization created a special site (*Sex & Gender*, n.d.) to provide definitions of various feminist terms in order to respond to some of the accusations of the right-wing government against feminism. The site claims that gender is about inequalities between biological men and women and that it is not a changeable identity. Some respondents, like Katalin, even told me that they avoided using the concept of gender altogether in discussions about women's issues. Katalin said that if she used the concept "then [she] ha[d] to explain the meaning of gender and explain that [she] d[idn't] mean that other thing, and then [she] bec[a]me transphobic by definition." Katalin's comment is a good indication that in Hungary, gender has

become such a sensitive term that even those who want to stay supportive of the trans community have to avoid using it.

To summarize, defining gender against the governmental discourse of gender ideology is one of the central characteristics of anti-gender feminist discourse. Anti-gender feminist definitions of gender are based on biological notions of manhood and womanhood and aim to fight patriarchal gender roles. However, such an insistence on defining gender as an analytic category that describes social inequalities between biologically determined men and women in Hungary is partly a reaction to the right-wing anti-gender climate. In attempting to avoid the accusations of right-wing actors, anti-gender feminism also needs to separate itself from socially less acceptable struggles, like those of trans rights movements. An association with the trans rights movement would present the feminist work as dangerous as well, or as Orsolya put it, “this would prove what the right-wing is saying.”

[Anti-Gender Feminism is Leftist](#)

Another important aspect of anti-gender feminist discourse is that it grounds itself in a leftist feminist perspective to avoid the right-wing accusation that feminism is part of liberal ideologies imposed by the West. Research participants usually explained leftist thinking as essential in opposing the state’s anti-gender politics and the country’s general illiberal sentiments. The leftist approach, as articulated by participants, advocates critical self-reflection amongst feminists and aims to understand why and how Hungary has become right-wing and opposed to feminist or other progressive ideas. Economic harms caused by the neoliberal restructuring of Hungary after state socialism, dissatisfaction with the capitalist system and hierarchical world order, and increased poverty instead of economic prosperity were often cited in interviews as reasons for a radical shift to the right in Hungary. These unfortunate results of

neoliberalism, according to participants, have been strategically utilized by the governing party Fidesz since the elections. The association between feminism and the West, liberalism, democracy and everything that neoliberalism brought to Hungary is seen to be one of the main reasons for the right-wing and anti-gender attitudes of “everyday people.” Thus, anti-gender feminist discourse has mobilized feminist leftist critique as a strategy to foster a more locally grounded feminist movement and to maintain the legitimacy and relevance of feminist work. Definitions of leftist feminism proposed by the participants do not always coincide with understandings of the same concept elsewhere, but for the sake of clarity, I will refer here to a range of arguments articulated by them as “leftist.”

Many participants, especially those opposed to trans inclusion or supporting sex work as work, identified themselves as “leftist” or “system critical.” When asked what a leftist or system critical position meant for her, Piroska explained,

With respect to feminism, it means that the women's position cannot be disembedded from material conditions, from production and reproduction. So it is not just the level of thinking, values, ideas like what people think about women and men, but how production and reproduction are organized. For instance – reproductive work is the foundation of the capitalist system and it's not defined as work that produces value, but something that is a natural task that needs to be done by the women. And this is very foundational to social status of women.

Piroska’s response is quite classic in its definition of leftist or Marxist feminism (Griffin, 2017). It prioritizes an analysis of the material conditions of production and reproduction for understanding the situation of women. Piroska’s and many other respondents’ answers show that leftist thought in Hungary is interested in understanding the material realities of their daily lives. Many of my participants raised an illustration of exemplary leftist feminist work through a publication by Aniko Gregor and Eszter Kovats (2018) titled *Women’s Affairs: Societal Problems and Solution Strategies in Hungary*. The focus of this publication is understanding the

needs of women in relation to material aspects such as care work, household duties, and labour exploitation.

Prioritizing such discussions is typical of feminist activist discourses as well as academic work. For example, a few of my participants, activists and starting academics, were part of academic workgroups or were linked with a Hungarian left-wing academic journal called *Fordulat*. Juli a younger feminist academic, who had recently started her job as a permanent faculty member at a large university in Budapest, explained their work as follows:

It's sociologists, economists ... it's people from a variety of backgrounds there's geographers and anthropologists whose goal is to address various issues that we're researching in Hungary from the world-systems perspective; to look at Hungary's particular position in the capitalist world system, and then we have subgroups which includes gender and reproduction, social reproduction [...]. And we produce a lot of [...] outputs that are partly academic, partly non-academic, so also popular writing, or talks or reading groups. And the publications as well. So, we write in Hungarian and there's a left-wing journal called *Fordulat* and we publish a lot there.

We can see through Juli's description that there is a rich collection of academic and popular work in Hungary producing knowledge and analysis from a left-wing perspective. While people from various disciplines are involved in such work, it also has a strong gender aspect. Furthermore, in Hungary, there is a large body of academic literature advocating that a self-reflexive and self-critical feminist approach is central to understanding and challenging the current right-wing regime (i.e. Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016; Kovats, 2018; Kovats & Poim, 2015).

One of the main arguments in these texts is that the turn to the right in Hungary cannot be explained without understanding the resentment against the economic impacts of neoliberal restructuring amongst Hungarian people (Bíró-Nagy, 2017; Fero, 2020; Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016; Kováts, 2018a, 2019). As feminism peacefully coexisted and was often supported by the

neoliberal language of “progress,” it started to be seen by many as a foreign imposition (Kováts, 2018a, 2019). Detaching feminism from neoliberal discourses, including feminist ones, and starting to address local and material problems of Hungarian women has thus been presented as a way for Hungarian feminist movements to regain popular support. In their essay “Thoughts on the Contested Relationship Between Neoliberalism and Feminism,” Gregor and Grzebalska (2016) argue that one of feminisms’ “original sins” was co-opting neoliberalism through engaging in human rights language and culturalist interpretations of inequalities, thus forgetting the societal concerns over economic hardships. They claim that “in order to oppose both neoliberalism and right-wing populism, progressives need to start addressing these same fears and insecurities that the right has exploited, but offer a set of comprehensive reforms instead of ad hoc populist solutions or cultural wars” (Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016, 17). Such comprehensive reforms, according to them, would be a focus on redistribution, state investment in high-quality public service, and equal attention to economic and civil rights.

Versions of these academic arguments were articulated in more direct, sometimes problematic, ways by many feminist activists I interviewed. In these discourses, leftist feminism was positioned against the so-called “liberal” or “neoliberal” feminism. Piroska elaborated that a leftist perspective “brings a lot of other things with itself, like the criticism of liberal identity politics [...]. And of course what Nancy Frazer wrote about – like recognition and redistribution for instance.” Nancy Frazer’s analysis and critique of recognition-based politics, which in the Hungarian context was often referred to as identity politics,⁶ is indeed a central reference in many of the abovementioned academic texts. The opposition to prioritizing “recognition” over

⁶ Fraser (2000) argues that the claims to recognizing difference have been dominating over the claims of egalitarian redistribution within social movements globally. This, according to her, has two results; it displaces and marginalizes economic struggles in the context of extreme economic inequalities of the capitalist order; and it simplifies and impoverishes group identities, serving separation, intolerance, and chauvinism.

material realities has also informed many activists' discourses. For example, Vilma, a feminist organizer who was not affiliated with one particular organization at the time of the research but actively worked on the issues of sex-work and pornography, including publishing popular articles or conducting lectures and seminars on the topics, critiqued a Women's March organized by a small feminist group in Budapest in 2016:

All the slogans and ideas [...] were [similar to] the original women's March in Washington [...]. they were shouting about Black Lives Matter, which Hungarian people don't know what it is [...]; how everyone should be respectful of sex worker rights, how the stupid conservative middle-aged Hungarians... from the Middle Ages Hungarians don't know how many genders are [there]. It was all just weird [...] compared to what the everyday life of Hungary is. The everyday life of Hungary is, firstly that there is a care crisis, there are four million people living in poverty here.

According to Vilma, concerns over racial equality, sex work or gender identity are not important to the lives of Hungarians. They are detached from the actual experiences of poverty and the care crisis and are "very very alien and very crazy ideas." Szandra similarly argued that "if you have nothing to eat you really don't care if you are a woman or a man."

Support for racial equality, trans and sex workers' rights was not only presented as irrelevant to Hungarian reality within leftist feminist discourse, but it was also rejected as part and parcel of the West's neoliberal agenda. According to Vilma, these discussions have been imposed on Hungarian feminist actors from elsewhere and serve "the neoliberal agenda called feminism in the name of feminism." She continued,

...two things happened. One was that the Open Society Foundation, which was funding ever since the system change in Hungary civil society, [...] and also the Norwegian Fund and the Netherlands, and International Planned Parenthood and Mama Cash and all that donor organizations [...] had a political change. They decided that there is no such a case as a woman's case anymore, there are only fragmented marginalized identities within that. So, there was a turn when in the name of progress and being intersectional, the women's cause just didn't exist

anymore on paper. And one of [...] the two main focuses of this fragmented marginalized identities, was trans rights and the other one was the sex workers. and they started funding campaigns and organizations, sensitivity training and all that.

Thus, in Vilma's analysis, concerns over trans inclusion, sex workers' labour rights or the language of intersectionality are viewed similarly: as part of the liberal identity politics popularized and supported by the West and imposed on Hungarian feminists through ideological and funding structures. As shown above, association with these issues is also seen to contribute to the alienation of feminist actors from the real problems of the Hungarian people. As this chapter focuses on the debates about trans rights and sex work, I discuss the conversations about race and intersectionality in more depth in chapter 6. In this chapter, it suffices to say that viewing the concerns over race as "Western impositions" to the Hungarian reality demonstrates the predominant, unmarked and silent whiteness of Hungarian feminism. So much so that even discussing the racialized aspects of feminist politics are perceived as the conversations that need to be happening elsewhere, not in Hungary. In this sense, embeddedness in unmarked whiteness is a central albeit invisible characteristic of anti-gender feminism.

Within anti-gender feminist discourse, only the leftist feminist position is imagined to have a capacity to overcome the hostility towards feminism in right-wing Hungary. Leftist feminism, according to this discourse, could better relate to the local people's real problems. For example, when Piroška was reflecting on current feminist debates in which she held a leftist position, she said,

I think it's important to have the debates, and I think it's vital that we practice self-reflection, and to dare to look at what we fucked up. I think we keep missing things if we don't look at what the right is reacting to, and what they are saying that we are not. It's not just that they are these evil conservative people who [are] voting right because they are right. There's a dialectic to it.

According to Piroška, the popular hostility towards feminism is a result of feminist actors “missing things” that are important for people, while right-wingers manage to address them. Critical self-reflection among feminist circles for Piroška is a way of repairing such failures. In Piroška’s case, this has meant critically evaluating feminist politics from a leftist perspective.

Anti-Gender Feminism Is for Everybody?

As discussed above, leftist feminism has offered a way for the feminist movement in Hungary to distance itself from the politics allegedly imposed by neoliberal feminist discourses and focus on the everyday problems of the Hungarian people. Relating to the wider public is one of the central ways in which the emerging anti-gender feminist discourse has envisioned surviving within the hostile, right-wing and anti-gender climate. Dorottya, a PhD graduate in gender studies, explained:

Feminism is identified with gender, gender is identified with LGBT, LGBT is identified with trans [and] we know how it is very much used in the hand of the Fidesz. But also, for me, it's important that we could talk about feminism in the sense that a lot of Hungarian average women would identify with. Like I want to get involved in research or activism or whatever, where [...] a middle-aged woman who has to take care of both kids and parents and plus working and doing the housework, could feel that “oh yeah my situation is very bad, and my situation is bad partly because I'm a woman and I have to double shift or triple shift”. I just want that feminism would mean something to her and that she doesn't have to think about I mean everyday people don't even know what LGBT acronym stands for. So, in this sense, I'm very angry at every discourse that helps in the direction that people would not think of feminism as addressing, you know, those huge masses and women's problems.

In this comment, Dorottya, who is herself part of the queer community, relayed her motivation to reach out and have a dialogue with what she called “everyday people.” She wanted to bridge the divide between the so-called everyday people and feminists. However, she also expressed awareness that associating feminism with LGB and trans rights would discourage the “Hungarian average woman” to affiliate with feminist work. This is why she preferred to

prioritize issues such as housework or childcare in her research and work. She believed it would help her to reach out to “huge masses” of women and make sure that feminism meant “something” to them.

Dorottya’s comments construct LGBT issues as separate from the everyday or ordinary, something that cannot be “common people’s” concern. Dividing concerns over social justice for marginalized groups from “common people’s” interests was typical in interviews with participants. Such a feminist narrative reiterated the governmental discourse in that it constructed “everyday people” as fully separate from trans or feminist struggles. The key difference is that within the polarity Dorottya created, feminists can still have a dialogue with the wider public if they choose their topics carefully and focus on the “majority” of women’s everyday struggles, whereas in the right-wing discourse, all feminist actors are depicted as dangerous and immoral liberal elites.

Dorottya’s willingness to reach out to the so-called common people demonstrates the core purpose of the anti-gender feminist discourse. It aims to address issues that it believes/claims the majority of women face in order to gain broader social support. Associating feminist work with other socially marginalized groups would be a barrier in this context. As Marianna, a Serbian gender scholar who had spent the past ten years living, studying, and working in Hungary, noted,

In general, there is a sense in the core of the movement, [...] that women have so many issues, let's not overcomplicate it. Because [...] it would take away attention from these issues that *they* are talking about, such as the safety of the women, women's labour rights, women's right to political representation, so on and so forth.

Marianna’s observation is astute—the emergent, leftist, anti-gender feminist discourse has wanted to reach out to the wider public and gain their approval by bringing forth problems

they think affect the majority of Hungarian women, such as women's labour rights. As Marianna said, including discussions over trans rights would only "overcomplicate" their attempts. Ilona, one of the few self-identified trans-supportive and intersectional feminists who had published prolifically on gender-related issues in popular media and lead some of the largest feminist protests in Hungary, explained this dynamic with an illuminative metaphor:

I've always told these rad femmes that you are... it's like we are in a ship on the stormy sea among these political circumstances. And for me, it's like they want to throw trans and non-binary people out, so that we, the others, cis people can be saved. And I don't think it's a good solution [...] We are in the same ship, and we must survive together. I don't want to sacrifice some people because they seem to be more extreme.

Ilona's metaphor perfectly summarizes how the willingness to survive in a hostile, right-wing and anti-gender climate, which she calls "stormy weather," can lead some feminist actors to decide to pick and choose their struggles carefully. In the Hungarian context, separating socially volatile struggles such as trans rights is seen as an issue of survival, a way of reaching out to the wider public and gaining support. In the attempt of rescuing feminism from the right-wing accusations, however, trans people or other less respectable women's groups, like sex workers, are indeed tossed out of the collective feminist ship.

Vilma's critique of the pornography industry is another example of how leftist, anti-gender discourse often frames its arguments by appealing to the concerns of the wider public. Vilma explained that she chose to work on pornography in order to address the "actual" problems of the real people that feminist movements have lost touch with and which the right-wing was addressing:

I do believe that the anti-gender movement⁷ and a very specific branch of them, who are very focused on sex, sexual education and also pornography [...] are

⁷ Here, Vilma is referring to the right-wing anti-gender movements supported by the state.

naming actual existing problems, which people experience in their everyday life. [...] For example, every class I go into, [...] the kids tell me[...] that strangling your partner is a good way to spice up sex and they actually practice it. [...] And then ordinary everyday people go home and they do not understand that they had a loving boy who was capable of intimacy yesterday, and today he's into the double anal penetration of a woman. And he's saying consent and feminism.

In this comment, Vilma indicates that she was disheartened by feminism discarding pornography as an issue or with it co-opting the feminist ideas of consent and sexual diversity. According to her, feminism should be serving the interests of the “everyday” people, and if it’s not feminists who will do it, right-wing actors will. Vilma continued to say that feminism “has become a marketing tool for enormous industries, such as the pornography industry,” which utilizes feminist concepts of empowerment and consent to drive its own capitalist agenda. According to her, “when you make feminism into a product and it serves the agenda of the ruling class, people feel that” (Vilma).

Vilma’s critique of pornography or debates about sex work in Hungarian feminism is quite similar to debates over the same issues elsewhere, where abolitionist perspectives position sex work and pornography as patriarchal exploitation of women and fight for its abolition and sex-positive approaches argue for valuing female sexuality and decriminalizing sex work (Hunt & Chamberland, 2006; Phipps, 2017; Sutherland, 2004). However, Vilma also linked the appropriation of feminist ideas by the “ruling class” to the distrust that “people” may have towards feminism, indicating that discussions about feminist politics in Hungary are tightly linked with the local context. Vilma’s comment shows that the debates over sex work and pornography in Hungary have been informed by feminist struggles within a hostile right-wing anti-gender context that has equated feminism with global capitalist and liberal elites who don’t care about common people. The perception that the right-wing was reaching out to the “everyday

people” while the feminist movement couldn’t, was one of Vilma’s main concerns. In this regard, her argument is similar to those made about the harms of trans rights for feminism—they are both conceptualized in terms of feminism’s ability to appeal to the interests of the ‘ordinary’ people or larger masses, and they are both articulated in relation to the hostile climate. By aiming to reach out to the “ordinary” public, anti-gender feminism competes with the populist rhetoric of Hungary’s right-wing government, which also claims to speak in the name of and to the “ordinary” people. In doing so, anti-gender feminism itself resorts to populism. However, within the feminist anti-gender discourse, populist rhetoric aims at dismantling gender roles and hierarchies, while governmental populist rhetoric focuses on building traditional and patriarchal gendered divisions.

Still, the goal of appealing to the needs and sensibilities of “everyday people” often limits the scope of feminist work to the needs of dominant groups such as white, heterosexual and cisgender Hungarian women. Almost-unanimous support for the abolitionist position in relation to sex work among Hungarian feminists is a good example. The vast majority of my research participants understood sex work as exploitation of women under patriarchy and supported the abolitionist position. Some even claimed that “in Hungary, all the feminists [were] abolitionists” (Orsolya). The only organization in Hungary that works with sex workers from a sex-positive perspective and supports decriminalization of sex work, Szexe, has been cast out by feminist groups. Aliza, a younger feminist and an LGBTQ organizer explained that “none of the feminist organizations wanted to work with them because of [their position on sex work].” However, the concerns over protecting women from patriarchal exploitation did not translate into sex workers’ support programs and initiatives locally. A dismissal of the concerns of sex workers also implies

negligence towards poor and mostly racialized women, such as Roma women, by Hungary's feminist groups.

Jázmin, a Roma feminist activist who was involved in sex workers' union a few years before this research, explained that the union's work often focuses on providing support to street-based Roma sex workers, "who [are] really harassed by the police" and who are the most vulnerable group of women in the country. However, she said that the reality of the lives of Roma women is hard to comprehend for mostly white and middle-class feminist actors in Hungary. She said,

Feminist organizing is mainly led by academics, who are white, coming from wealthy families, had luxury to study and go into academia and they see women's realities from a different perspective than those working at the margins or living at the margins.

Jázmin viewed the whiteness and high social class of feminist groups as central to their position on sex work. According to her, these conversations "simplified issues [...] in the name of female empowerment [in the] really an upper-middle-class sense of self" (Jázmin). Similarly, Erzsébet Barát, a feminist academic who was one of the founders of a feminist research center at a university in a smaller Hungarian town in the early 90s and was teaching and researching gender since then, was critical of the dominant trends of anti-trans and anti-sex work positions within Hungarian feminism. She emphasized how maintaining a respectable image of a woman underlies the distancing of the feminist movement from the sex worker's movement:

All this concern about prostitution vs non-prostitutes is a problematic binary because somehow it glorifies those who are not prostitutes. So, there is an indirect, involuntary, but nevertheless, in its effect, it's distancing yourself from prostitutes completely in a gesture of pity, and that is a problem to me. And let's make the distinction more flexible, more overlapping, more intertwined, so make this distinction more relative and less absolute. And how about re-reading Gale Rubin's "Traffic in Women" and why she doesn't want to use the concept of patriarchy and for what reasons she wants to introduce the sex-gender system.

And then we could maybe think about the relative difference between the trafficking in decent wives and trafficking in prostitutes.

Erzsébet Barát 's insight, while different from the binary debate around sex work as a choice versus sex work as an exploitation, emphasized that, underneath feminist debates over sex work, we can notice self-distancing from women who inhabit a lower social class, are stigmatized and are not seen as “decent.” Affiliation with sex workers would indeed be against Hungarian feminist interests within anti-gender feminist discourse, as this discourse is strongly oriented toward making itself relatable and likable for the “majority” of people and appealing to “everyday women’s” needs. This is one of the underlying reasons for such a strong abolitionist stance among the majority of my participants and shows how the debates over sex work are tied to the situation illiberal governance has put feminist movements in. What is more, it also shows that the strong desire to appeal to the “majority” of women’s needs prioritizes the concerns of white, middle-class Hungarian women.

Anti-Gender Feminism is the Solution

Finally, participants often constructed the leftist, anti-trans and anti-sex work position as a new, more progressive and critical feminist perspective. Within anti-gender feminist discourse, such a position is seen to address the shortcomings of earlier feminist work that instigated hostility against all feminist actors. Many respondents described the discovery of the leftist feminist perspective as progress in their personal feminist paths. For example, Piroska told me that at some point in her activist journey she could no longer stay in an organized NGO and donor-driven agenda and needed a change, as she was frustrated by how ineffective their work was. She continued:

I met some new people that I could more connect to with respect to our ideas [...] and that's when we started to really critique this liberal identity politics and liberal

feminism. Mostly though writing, exhibitions, so different means.

For Piroska, finding leftist groups that critiqued existing feminist practices was a way to move her feminist politics forward and overcome the impasse of organized, NGO-based activism.

Dorottya also described her intention to change her feminist path. She said that she volunteered and worked for LGBT and LBT organizations before, but now she wanted to get involved in more “mainstream feminism.” She said,

I somehow got a bit I think disappointed in the LGBT activism. I didn't feel it was feminist enough [...] or I felt [...] that there is this so huge problem of so many average straight women who are suffering from violence and poverty and everything. And compared to that, [...] I felt that the LGBT activism or even lesbian activism cannot really address questions that concern... it's just really just about numbers...

Dorottya's comments show that addressing concerns of “average straight women” had emerged as a worthy goal within dominant feminist frameworks in Hungary. This had made Dorottya reconsider the work she was doing, or how it was supporting the feminist cause. For Dorottya, doing work that would result in supporting larger numbers of women took priority over her previous work in smaller LGBT communities. Piroska's and Dorottya's stories show that they both acquired positions that were depicted as ways forward within feminist discussions in Hungary over the last few years. These positions promised to address the frustrations they experienced in their activist paths in a hostile climate. In Hungary, it was a particular formulation of leftist, anti-identity, majority-interest feminism that claimed to be such a new and radical alternative and a way of overcoming state hostility.

Those who don't agree with the feminist stance advocated by anti-gender feminist discourse were often critiqued for their naïveté, unawareness, and harmfulness. According to Katalin, she received a lot of criticism from leftist colleagues in the early days of her feminist

activism. She recalled: “When we started doing what we did everyone hated us [...]. They told that we are fake feminists, bullshit liberal feminists etc.” Katalin said that she took in a lot of the criticism and committed to learning more about the debates. As a result, she changed her position on various matters:

I changed my position on a lot of issues. Other people too [...] The standard issues, like prostitution. [...] I became an abolitionist as years went by. [...] Probably I became more leftist, I am giving much more emphasis to economic circumstances and motivations so that also sort of happened. So, I made some genuine move to get closer to other feminists.

For Katalin, changing her position to abolitionism as well as gaining more insight into particular leftist arguments was a way of establishing herself as a legitimate feminist and forming closer ties to other feminists. Katalin’s story shows that anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungary claims that it is intellectually superior to other ways of doing feminism and that it has dominance over the very boundaries of what constitutes feminism proper.

The dichotomy between liberal versus leftist feminisms often does not leave space for those feminist actors who see themselves in the middle of the debates. According to the participants, support for debated issues such as sex work or trans inclusion is labelled as a liberal, and thus outdated, superficial, and irrelevant, stance. Navigating this polarity can be challenging. For example, the LBT organization where Márta worked was inclusive of trans women in their programming and activities; however, they also maintained partnerships with other feminist organizations that had been publicly transphobic. Márta explained that navigating between these two positions was difficult:

It's very hard for some of us [...] because if you want to communicate in a different way, which doesn't belong to this camp or that camp, [...] or incorporates some aspects of both sides, or you have your own position, this cannot be articulated in these polarities.

Márta's description of these difficulties is illuminating. In her case, she had to publicly clarify that the organization she works at is trans-inclusive and had to avoid these discussions with some of the feminist partners. In addition to showing the difficulty of articulating an alternative position, Márta's example shows the pressure for everyone to pick one side or the other in these polarized debates.

Positioning oneself within feminist debates was often identified as being very important for those who were just taking their first steps in feminist life. Zoé, a recent graduate of the MA program in Gender Studies, which was shut down the year she completed her studies, talked about her conflicting feelings about the debates:

Right now, I think of me like trying to be in the middle of the debate, just not being fully in the trans activism part or not being fully in the TERF part. Because I still don't know. And personally, I feel that people [can] express themselves however they want to, and I want gender roles to be less restrictive. [...] If we talk about it, I don't know like what I say yet because I'm still gender-critical and I'm not sure [...]. and also the question of birth privileges of transgender people, so like if someone transitions to female do they get rid of the privileges she got because she was socialized as a man. and that kind of questions. and because I cannot be in either part, I'm more critical.

Zoé discussed being connected to both feminist and LGBTQ activist circles, and she found it hard to take either side of the debate. She personally felt supportive of trans identification but couldn't dismiss the other side's arguments. She later explained that she had to be careful in what she said, because "if in LGBT activism a lesbian woman is openly more critical of gender than supportive of trans rights, then she can get shunned out by the community" (Zoé). For her, as a lesbian woman and a feminist, establishing herself within both feminist and LGBTQ communities required making choices that she didn't feel comfortable making.

The fear of being criticized for one's position, as described by Zoé, can silence some voices. Sena explained, "I was thinking: 'Oh should I publish my thesis?' and then I thought: 'Oh no, someone is going to hate me for this!' It's a bit scary for someone who is young and just starting because many feminists are super critical." The fear of being pulled into the debate or being hated for her position made Sena rethink publishing her work. As she said, this is especially hard for those who are just trying to find their voice within the feminist movement. The dominance of a particular leftist perspective in the field and the demonization of what is constructed as a "liberal" voice can thus leave many opinions out and unvoiced.

In this chapter, I have discussed the main characteristics of anti-gender feminism that I argue has emerged within Hungarian feminism as a way of surviving a right-wing and hostile anti-gender climate. Anti-gender feminism insists on defining gender as a concept that describes inequalities between men and women and refuses to see gender as an identity that can shift. It proposes a leftist feminist perspective that centers the material interests of the majority of women for confronting right-wing anti-gender discourse, which depicts feminists as detached from the realities of the common people. Centering the needs of the "majority of women," is one of the central characteristics of anti-gender feminism. Thus, while opposing the populist anti-gender rhetoric of the Fidesz's government, feminist anti-gender discourse itself engages in populist tactics when arguing for the need of reaching out to the majority of women and have a dialogue with the "ordinary" public. This also requires feminist self-distancing from unpopular causes, such as trans inclusion and sex-workers' struggles. Despite these exclusions, the leftist feminist perspective claims intellectual superiority over "older" modes of doing feminism and presents

itself as a useful critique for overcoming the alienation and hostility feminism has received in recent years from Hungarian state.

Chapter 6: Anti-Gender Feminism and its Anti-colonial Sensibilities

In the previous chapter, we saw how anti-gender feminism distances itself from confrontational struggles, such as trans-inclusion and sex work, and instead claims that focusing on the needs of “average”, white, straight and cisgender women is the only way forward for feminism. In addition, the anti-gender feminist discourse was grounded in a leftist perspective and was critical of the neoliberal world order as well as convergences between feminism and neoliberalism. The critique of western dominance over the local feminist agenda often carried anti-colonial sentiments and was rightfully critical of global hierarchies. Anti-colonial sentiments that surfaced in some of the arguments articulated within anti-gender feminist discourse did not specifically identify with other anti-colonial feminist perspectives, such as postcolonial (i.e. McClintock, 1995; Mohanty, 1997; Spivak, 1991) or decolonial (i.e Koobak & Marling, 2014; Lugones, 2010; Maese-Cohen, 2010; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006) feminisms. However, the participants would often use arguments that resembled postcolonial or decolonial feminist critique, which I refer to as an anti-colonial sensibility.

In this chapter, I unpack and analyze these arguments in more detail and argue that anti-gender feminist discourse, despite its anti-colonial sensibilities, is detached from feminist theories of post-colonialism or decoloniality. It is detached from post- and decolonial perspectives by prioritizing economic analysis over the analysis of symbolic constructions of global inequalities. Also by prioritizing North American, white, leftist frameworks, it differs from recent decolonial feminist perspectives that advocate for decolonizing knowledge by preferring border and marginalized epistemologies instead of building on the dominant Marxist or Foucauldian theories (Mignolo, 2011; Tlostanova, 2010). Finally, it is distinct from post-colonial and decolonial feminist frameworks because it is uncritical of its own embeddedness in

whiteness and disregards race as an important component of feminist analysis and work. I argue that prioritizing the needs of the “majority” while at the same time claiming a marginalized position aligns Hungarian anti-gender feminist discourse with state right-wing discourses, which also often rely on similar anti-colonial arguments.

Anti-Colonial Critiques of Western Feminisms

The leftist feminist critique of liberal or neoliberal feminisms, their affiliation with the discourse of progress, or their compliance with the donor and human rights agenda is founded on an anti-colonial sensibility and often resembles post-colonial or transnational feminist argumentation. Piroška described how Hungarian feminists were often made to feel that they needed to be catching up with their Western feminist colleagues:

When I meet British feminists, for example, I feel a distance, [...] the same with American, the same with Canadians, the same with British, and also German sometimes and Belgian, there is this whole idea that we should be catching up to them and we are left behind ideologically and once we understand, and once we are just as open and progressive as those countries are, we will get to the point, where they are in history. Which is a very, very, very poor framing I think, especially if you look at the depth of the relations between these countries.

Piroška’s comment describes how within feminist discussions, some countries and their feminist actors are often depicted as lagging behind in history. They are seen as not progressive enough as compared to their Western counterparts. In this discourse, progress is usually understood in linear temporal terms - Hungarian feminists are expected to catch up with the ideas of Western feminists once Hungary catches up with the West.

Piroška’s observation about hierarchical relationships between Western and Eastern European states or feminisms is well documented. Many Eastern European scholars have argued for the usefulness of postcolonial theory as a heuristic tool for understanding the positioning of

Eastern Europe within global hierarchies (Lazarus, 2012; Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2012, Owczarzak, 2009; G. C. Spivak et al., 2006; Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). More recently scholars such as Madina Tlostanova have engaged with decolonial feminist frameworks to situate post-socialist spaces within the colonial word order (Tlostanova, 2012, 2015). This literature critiques the depiction of Eastern Europe as a still-developing and permanently transitioning sibling of Western European states, which are presented as the core of Europeanness (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). The framework of transition from socialist to democratic states has deemed post-socialist states to perpetually be “catching up” with Western Europe “in both material and institutional terms” (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008. 320). Gender and sexuality are usually part of the discourses of development and progress that Eastern Europe is supposed to achieve so that it can truly belong to the European family (Kulpa, 2014). Scholars argue that Europe’s popular, administrative or legal discourses often depict Eastern Europe as homophobic and backwards compared to Western Europe (Kulpa, 2014; Ulbricht et al., 2015). According to Kulpa (2014), Western Europe often assumes the role of educating and teaching Eastern European states about European values and democracy. In the comment cited above, Piroška is critical of such asymmetrical relationships, which often present gender relations or feminist responses to them as an issue of development and progress instead of understanding the complexity of the local situation.

The critique of how the feminist agenda in Hungary is often driven by the priorities of international donors is another example of anti-colonial sentiments within Hungary’s leftist feminist discourse. Many post-colonial and transnational scholars are indeed critical of how feminist, queer or other organizations in the Global South depend on funding from the Global North, which in turn determines the discourses or strategies of activism for them (Bacchetta &

Haritaworn, 2011; Sabsay, 2013). While it is problematic to present Hungary as part of the Global South, some of these conversations are relevant for understanding the Hungarian context. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil society organizations, including feminist ones, have been exclusively dependent on Western grant money. The introduction of feminist ideas developed in the context of “democratization” – Hungary’s move from a socialist regime toward liberal democracy in the early 1990s (Zimmermann, 2008). These historical and political contexts shaped feminist agendas in Hungary in particular ways, and dependency on Western ideological or financial support has often frustrated local feminists. Juli, a younger feminist academic also affiliated with left-wing academic work on the topic of gender, explained that the reason why intersectionality as a framework was sometimes seen as a Western imposition on Hungarian feminists had to do with the asymmetrical context:

I think [intersectionality has] been overused in a very superficial way and I think that that’s rightfully critiqued. But again it’s very important to be intersectional. [...] and the context of that is partly [...] competing for resources, [...] a lot of it has to do with where the funding for NGOs comes from, and the dominant international frameworks.

While Juli sees the importance of intersectional thinking, she is critical of how it has become a superficially inclusive framework in recent international human rights work. According to her, this causes resentment among local feminist activists who must comply with dominant international frameworks while competing for funding with others. Szandra, for example, explained that receiving funding support is often conditional on the politics of a feminist group or organization. She recalled how some feminist organizations were denied financial support because of their abolitionist stances. Jázmin, who had been involved in sex workers’ union, also commented that the bitterness of Hungarian feminist organizations towards the union is often indeed caused by competition for financial resources. The international human

rights framework, according to Vilma, underwent a change since 2015-2016 and support for trans inclusion and sex workers' labour rights became important markers for 'progressive work'. Within Hungarian feminist circles, this is often perceived as an imposition of irrelevant or problematic agendas on local feminist groups, who have different approaches or priorities.

Another reason for being critical of financial dependence on Western funding sources had to do with their compliance with the neoliberal economic agenda of the West. Vilma explained:

I was in civil society, and I do know the ideology of grants that come out from there. They have teams and topics around two main agendas: one is a liberal democracy, and the other is an unregulated industry. And that's basically what the grants do [...] they provide the ideological basis for these [...] economic agendas.

In Vilma's narrative, international granting agencies support the Western neoliberal economic agenda, such as an unregulated market with the ideology of liberal democracy. Her analysis is an important critique of how international development or human rights frameworks can shape feminist or more generally civil society work in non-Western or not-fully-Western spaces, like Hungary and therefore perpetuate the interests of dominant imperial powers. As noted by Anna Agathangelou (2013), these frameworks often justify exploitative political and economic frameworks through self-asserted moral superiority. Within a strong right-wing climate, where feminist actors receive no support from local governments or local foundations, such a relationship of dependency can result in resentment. Vilma continued:

The problem with the right, with the donors, with the neoliberal agenda, with us living in the same economy we are fighting, is that it actually does make it impossible for us to collectively work against them. that's why we hate it.

Vilma's comment illustrates the frustration and anger with the difficult situation many of my respondents have to live and work in. For them, it is difficult to critique the source of their support due to pragmatic reasons such as funding, and because their critique can coincide with

the critique of the West by the right-wing government. As noted in chapter 3, Fidesz's government has indeed built its legitimacy by critiquing the EU's infringement on Hungary's moral or political sovereignty. This is the reason why many research respondents expressed frustration about articulating a nuanced critique of East-West dynamics without being associated with governmental discourse. For example, Juli said that:

It becomes increasingly difficult to articulate a position that's critical of the regime, the government in Hungary [...] but [...] is also critical of neoliberalism and all the cultural manifestations or the ways in which the neoliberal capitalist system is being reinforced by a lot of liberal feminism for instance.

Juli's comment is a good example of the difficulties of voicing a nuanced critique of particular feminist discourses when all feminist work is perpetually discredited by the government.

In addition to a relationship of dependency, frustration with Western feminist approaches and frameworks often has historical and material reasons. Mary, one of the early feminist activists, remembers in the 90s, during Hungary's early transition years, there was heightened interest in Eastern European spaces. She noted that scholars from various Western countries would often base their research on information provided by local feminist researchers without giving them credit:

They came here and sat down with Hungarian women scholars, sort of sucked all the information out of them and went home and wrote scholarly articles. They got published, which added to their CV, which, you know, got them academic jobs. And very soon the Hungarian sociologists especially here were feeling really pissed off about this.

Mary's memory points out a problematic relationship between Western and non-western academics that has been noted by Eastern European scholars. For example, in her article *Can the post-Soviet think? On coloniality of knowledge, external imperial and double colonial difference*,

Tlostanova (2015) is critical of how post-soviet scholars are often only viewed as carriers of empirical knowledge in Western academia, while the theoretical insights always come from the West⁸.

Based on my experiences in Eastern Europe feminist movements, I can affirm that attending to and critiquing asymmetrical global relationships in activism or academia is important for understanding contemporary feminism in Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Eastern European feminist scholars have been unpacking this relationship since the early 2000s. For example, an often-cited article by Allaine Cerwonka (2008) detailed the frustrations and differences between so-called Eastern European and Western feminisms. Cerwonka (2008, 810-811), claimed that neither the depictions of Eastern Europe as left behind or lacking nor its depiction as local, authentic and completely different from Western feminist thought accounted for the reality of Eastern European feminisms. She focused on detailing the multidirectional flow of information between various spaces, between Eastern and Western feminisms and insisted on understanding Eastern European feminisms as informed and influenced by local, regional, or

⁸ As a feminist, queer activist and scholar who has spent most of her life in Georgia, another post-Soviet and therefore non-hegemonic state, I could closely relate to these critiques. I had to explain the “situation” in Georgia for feminists in LGBTQ+ communities to various ethnographers from the West. In addition, as someone who had spent the most formative years of my life in Budapest’s feminist scene, like the participants of this research, I felt protective towards local intellectual insights and theoretical contributions. However, in the context of this research, I was also a scholar affiliated with a Western university, carrying the institutional commitments to feminist practice and theory dominant at my institution. Negotiating the contradictions of my dual social and academic positions was an important aspect of this research, which I describe in detail in Chapter 2. Here it would suffice to say, that the principles of feminist ethnography, including commitment to intersectionality, feminist politics and self-reflexivity were my guiding principles for escaping some of the traps of the ethnographic method. Maintaining a position of an “ambivalent observer” (Fields, 2013) helped me stay committed to providing rich and detailed descriptions of the research findings, while at the same time indicating and reflecting on the personal or epistemological biases affecting my analysis. Finally, the acknowledgement of differences of theoretical and intellectual commitments between me and some of my participants helped me to engage with the feminist knowledge and arguments of Hungarian feminists on an equal ground as a fellow activist and an academic, connected to the same geopolitical region. In this dissertation, I describe and analyze predominant leftist discourses in Hungarian feminism, which I call anti-gender feminism, as unique and new perspective in feminist thought instead of resorting to the progressivist paradigm of “catching up”. I critique this discourse as yet another theorist.

transnational discourses (Cerwonka, 2008, 811). However, the critical or leftist discourse articulated by participants in my research was significantly different from Cerwonka's transnational analysis. In the discourses of the left-leaning participants, the "local" problems were usually presented as ultimately unique to Hungary. The possibility of transnational connections was usually dismissed by the claim that Western feminists don't understand local feminist concerns. Such insistence on local uniqueness prevented anti-gender feminist discourse from a dialogue with feminist collectives not only in the West, but also in Eastern Europe or the Global South. Despite the critique of Western progressivism or moral superiority articulated within anti-gender, left-wing feminist discourse in Hungary, the critique was not related to concerns over global inequalities and differences, nor did it explicitly dialogue with other feminist theories exploring similar dynamics, such as post-colonial or decolonial feminisms. Therefore, while I argue that the social and political context that supported the emergence of the anti-gender feminism is a way of coping with the right-wing anti-gender climate, I am also critical of it. As demonstrated below, my analysis is critical of anti-gender feminist blindness to its own whiteness when outlining its disadvantaged position compared to the West as it fails to consider the importance of race for feminist work or engage with transnational dialogues with the Global South. I am also critical of its appropriation of populist, nationalist and anti-colonial rhetoric which prioritizes the needs of white, heterosexual women in the name of rescuing feminism from right-wing anti-gender hostility.

Is a Critique of Neoliberalism Always Anti-colonial?

While the leftist anti-gender feminist discourse articulated by the participants was informed by anti-colonial sensibilities, and often used analytic tools offered by post- or decolonial scholarship, it was also significantly different from post-colonial and decolonial

feminisms because their critique primarily relied on economic critiques of neoliberalism and prioritized the discussion of economic asymmetries over symbolic hierarchies. Much of post-colonial theory also relies on Marxist frameworks in its interpretations of global inequalities. However, critiquing the symbolic construction of the “East” as backwards, exotic, or uncivilized, has been central to various post-colonial thinkers and projects (McClintock, 1995; McLeod, 2010; Mufti & Shohat, 1997). However, when Hungarian feminist scholars utilized some of these anti-colonial arguments, they primarily focused on critiquing economic aspects of inequalities as reasons for popular discontent with the ideas associated with “progress” and the West. In fact, in anti-gender feminist discourse, discussions of symbolic politics were often dismissed as “culturalist interpretation both of prevailing [economic] injustices”(Kováts, 2019, 60). In addition, despite the call for local analysis of local problems, the theoretical frameworks that these leftist arguments were grounded on were mostly based on the work of the US-based, Marxist, white scholars, such as Nancy Fraser. More recently, critiquing Marxist or other grand narratives and advocating for more locally-produced knowledge and alternative genealogies have been primary concerns for decolonial scholarship coming from different parts of the world, including Central and Eastern Europe (Kulpa & Mizielinska, 2011; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Mizielinska & Kulpa, 2011). However, these are not the works that inform the leftist feminist critique in Hungary. Therefore, it would be hard to see such leftist critique as aligned with these postcolonial or decolonial feminist perspectives.

Leftist feminist discourse in Hungary critiques neoliberalism and the ways it coincides with the discourse of democracy, primarily in material and Marxist terms. Among the research participants, there was a clear awareness of how discourses of progress and catching up with the West positioned Hungarian actors on an unequal footing with their Western colleagues. The

primary subject of their analysis was the neoliberal economic policies of the EU, or broadly-defined West. Concepts such as imperial or colonial ideologies of these spaces, while sometimes mentioned, were not the main frameworks of analysis. Thus, while I could recognize anti-colonial sensibilities in their critique, it was not how leftist anti-gender feminist arguments were presented to me in this research. Academic literature supporting and analyzing leftist arguments coming from Hungary (Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016; Kováts, 2016a) also primarily references Marxist and economic frameworks. Nancy Fraser's (2009) analysis of the harms of complicities between feminism and neoliberalism is usually the key theoretical grounding for these texts. Her name was often cited by the participants as well, even those who could primarily be classified as more "activist" than "academic". Economic exploitation of Hungary within the EU and the relative poverty of the majority of the Hungarians, as explained earlier, were seen to be a reason for the popular support of right-wing values. The disappointment due to a never-materialized promise of prosperity after joining the EU and a more general disappointment in the very idea of Europe, according to my participants, led to the support of its only alternative – right-wing and EU-critical rhetoric. Erzsébet Barát, a Hungarian academic who was explicitly critical of the predominant leftist discourse in Hungary explained:

Most sociologists in Hungary are very structuralist and that lends easily to neo-conservative, very orthodox readings of Marx, and the feminist followers of Marx, Nancy Fraser for example. I read against them, I problematize or deconstruct them, if you wish, not against but to deconstruct them [...]. Their other assumption is that no one else has been critiquing neoliberalism from within feminism, because the final move is that queer theory means Judith Butler so the ultimate evil... so there is a lot of scapegoating. And, actually, they don't even see how much their discourse is also a hate speech discourse. Like really righteous, vindictive, like character killings in public.

Barát's observation emphasized that the critique of neoliberalism by Hungarian leftist feminists is primarily based on Marxist and structuralist epistemologies, illustrating that post-colonial or decolonial feminist frameworks are not the primary source or orientation for Hungarian feminist critiques, despite their anti-colonial sensibilities. Barát also noticed the leftist critique also often ignores already-existing critiques of neoliberalism done by feminists who work from different theoretical stances. As Barát ironically put it, Judith Butler's work, for example, is often depicted as an "ultimate evil" by anti-gender feminism. Indeed, there is a distaste towards post-structural feminist work within Hungarian leftist anti-gender feminist discourse. In chapter 5, I discussed how it refuses to think of both sex and gender as socially constructed and tries to limit the analytic meaning of gender to the description of inequalities between men and women. Thus, despite the justifiable anti-colonial sensibilities, Hungarian leftist feminist discourse articulates its discontent using a materialistic, essentialist perspective. It does not, or only partially engages with the cultural and symbolic analysis that post-colonial or decolonial approaches could offer (i.e Koobak & Marling, 2014; Kulpa, 2014). Leftist analysis that does not focus on symbolic layers of sex and gender easily becomes transphobic discourse, which Barát classified as neoconservative and as hate speech.

In addition, the centering of a white western feminist discourse such as Nancy Fraser's is another way in which Hungarian anti-gender feminist discourse distances itself from post-colonial or decolonial feminist insights. Barát continued:

The irony of the ironies is that, when they produce a criticism of neoliberal global capitalism, they also use foreign scholarship, and then it's not foreign. So, [they] call you someone who is academically trying to impose something that is irrelevant and alien and, if you wish, non-productive for critique [and it] comes from abroad, it's not discussing us. Although when we are discussing neoliberal capitalism, we are also using them.

Zsazsa's description of the "irony of the ironies" is quite telling. The critique of Western centeredness in academia or activism is important for various anti-colonial and especially more recent decolonial projects (Mizielinska & Kulpa, 2011; Tlostanova, 2015). However, in the Hungarian case, such critique doesn't always result in the search for less hegemonic, more locally-grounded epistemologies. It easily utilizes the work of Western and white Marxist scholars, which stand as theoretical justifications for local arguments.

The argumentation for critiquing "Western" and "liberal" politics, such as support for sex work or trans communities, is also borrowed from Western feminist discourses. For example, Zoltán, an LGBTQ activist observed:

It's very interesting because most of them are also left-leaning and critical of Western discourses infiltrating Hungary, but the discourse that they do use... this trans discourse is fully Western and has really not much relevance for the Hungarian case. So, in that sense, it's a bit tricky. But you can quite easily trace how they start following some, mostly the UK, maybe some German websites, or feminist circles and then they bring it back to Hungary.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the concerns about the harms of trans politics, intensely debated among feminists, are not a reflection of the politics of the trans movement in Hungary. Feminist movements rarely address the issues that Hungarian trans movements are currently working with. However, they warn against the alleged harms of teenage surgeries or hormonal treatments assumed to be normalized in Western countries. Marking trans supportive frameworks as uniquely Western and imposed legitimizes trans exclusionary position as local and thus as superior. Trans-exclusionary politics and the arguments articulated by the participants were often indeed rooted in broader and global feminist conversations. The anti-colonial argumentation used in relation to trans-politics thus is quite deceiving. It justifies transphobic argumentation in the name of the local voice.

In this section, I have argued that anti-colonial sensibilities characteristic of the predominant leftist or what I call anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungary do not always align with post- or decolonial feminist frameworks coming from Eastern Europe or elsewhere. Often, they rely on the Western and white scholar or activist voices.

Race as a Western Imposition

Leftist argumentation in Hungary also ignores or explicitly denies the relevance of the racial analyses for understanding the Hungarian situation or for planning feminist politics. Race and the construction of racial hierarchies within nation-states or globally, however, are at the very heart of post- or decolonial perspectives (Chrisman, 2003; Nagel, 2002; Quijano, 2007; Tlostanova, 2011). Postcolonial discussions have critiqued racialization of the third world as “savage” or “exotic” as a way of constructing European superiority and justifying colonial violence in the 18-19th centuries (McClintock, 1995). Quijano (2007), one of the central proponents of the decolonial perspective, traced the emergence of colonial world order to the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the Americas in the 16th century. For him, it was the invention of hierarchical racial order by the European colonizers which contributed to the creation of the “evolutionary continuum from the primitive to the civilized; from the traditional to the modern; from the savage to the rational” that has persisted until today (Quijano, 2007, 176).

Race was not an important layer of analysis for any of my participants, except for those who were themselves racialized. The respondents would sometimes see the discussions about race and intersectionality as another Western imposition. The unwillingness to think about racialization or racial hierarchies seriously is another crucial difference between postcolonial and

decolonial feminist discourses elsewhere and leftist feminist perspectives articulated in Hungary. The dismissal of race as a useful category of analysis shines a light on the unarticulated whiteness of the majority of the Hungarian feminisms.

Discussion of local racial hierarchies was not cited as part of the feminist debates by any of the participants. In fact, race would not really come up in the interviews, unless I specifically asked about it, or unless I was talking to a racialized person. In many interviews, I could see there was a subtle distaste towards discussing race in Hungary and towards the concept of intersectionality. In fact, a few of the participants mentioned intersectionality as one of the foreign concepts imposed onto Hungarian contexts where racial conversations are not so important, or they are different from the West. For example, when I asked if racial hierarchies were something that Hungarian feminism talked about, Réka, a leader of one of the major feminist organizations, responded:

We had some kind of debates and discussions about this issue: how much we include Roma women, or not include Roma women, partly because of CEU students. So sometimes this narrative or this process of importing struggles and how race works in the US is different from how race works in Hungarian discourse. It's just their history of feminism is different from the history of feminism here. [...] You cannot just transport it into the Hungarian discourse. But some people after having studied at CEU tried to do that, and were making similar remarks about intersectionality that makes sense in an American discourse or even in a British discourse which was a colonial state but doesn't make that much sense in the Hungarian discourse. Here we also have of course historical communities, historical minorities, Jews, Roma mainly, but here we had different processes, different traumas.

Réka points out that importing conversations about race theorized in the US or another colonial context may not be relevant for Hungary. Much of the scholarship about race comes from spaces with colonial histories, making it difficult to make sense of racial hierarchies in predominantly white contexts with no colonial history, like Eastern Europe. However, Réka is

aware that the inclusion of Roma women was a topic of conversation among Hungary's mainstream feminist groups. In the last decade, Roma feminist groups have themselves "raised issues of multiple discrimination (based on race, class, and gender), education for girls, lack of access to health care, segregated maternity wards, and coercive sterilization" in Hungary and Eastern Europe in general (Schultz, 2012, 37) motivating some of these conversations. Réka also comments that Roma and Jewish communities have their own historical traumas, grounded in the local context. While local racialized histories and contexts may indeed be different from, for example, the US, analyses of these specificities rarely happen within predominantly white Hungarian feminist groups. Pointing out differences from the West is often a way of avoiding these discussions. For example, in her response, Réka emphasizes that these conversations were started by the students at Central European University. As an American institution, CEU was often depicted as an imposer of "foreign" feminist discourses in Hungary by other participants as well. Thus, Réka's emphasis on the fact that it was CEU students who were invested in conversations about race, also marked these conversations as foreign imports. They would not be a priority for Hungarian feminists otherwise.

Later in the same interview, Réka asserted again that in terms of violence against women, the existing Hungarian feminist organizations "serve *any* woman because violence against women is the same in any context". However, she added: "Yes, potentially there might be a better chance of getting a restraining order if you are Roma and your husband is Roma." Réka's comment claims that addressing gender-based violence will look similar for any woman, and thus she supports the position that race is not a relevant category, at least in the context of gender-based violence. But she then remembers that there is a difference in how police would treat a Roma versus a non-Roma man accused of domestic violence. I asked her if anyone was

working on understanding these differences, or how they may affect women's decisions for filing a complaint or contacting the police. She agreed that it would be an important topic to understand, but not something she or her organization had worked on. These responses reveal that the framework of looking at race in Hungary is seen as irrelevant for feminist work. It is viewed as foreign and thus unnecessary to work on. Specificities of racial hierarchies may emerge in practice, but they are not treated as important enough for reconsidering frameworks used to support women. In this case, they are not seen as important enough for reconsidering how women who experience violence are being supported.

The claim that race is irrelevant to one's politics is often rooted in the unmarked whiteness of participants. It reflects their privilege to not have to think about race. Viewing racial analysis as a 'Western imposition' also avoids recognizing the predominant whiteness of the Hungarian feminist movement and its self-positioning vis-à-vis Western and white feminisms while disregarding the work coming from racialized and Third World scholars. Seeing race as a "Western imposition" erases the rich and voluminous work of post-colonial or decolonial feminist scholars from the Global South like Maria Lugones (2006); Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1997), Gayatri Spivak (1991) and others. It may justifiably be critical of how a concept such as "intersectionality" is privileged and instrumentalized by international Human Rights frameworks, but instead of advocating for a more in-depth analysis of racial hierarchies, it disregards race as a category of analysis altogether. By doing this, Hungarian feminist discourse diverges from post-colonial and decolonial thought and practice.

[Does Race Matter for Hungarian Feminism?](#)

The depiction of race-sensitive theorizing as "Western" disregards existing racial hierarchies in Hungary and justifies the race-blindness of Hungarian feminist thought and

practice. Roma participants of this research pointed out multiple harms of race-blind feminist politics. In this section, I focus on Roma feminist narratives. The interviews with Roma women show that dismissing the importance of race when planning feminist services and initiatives often creates barriers for Roma women to access them. In addition, race-blind conversations often leave the lived realities and everyday problems of Roma women unexamined. Unawareness of Roma women's history and struggles makes new and emerging Roma feminists less likely to join larger feminist struggles. Attempts to include Roma women in larger feminist platforms often end up being tokenistic.

The literature theorizing race in Eastern Europe or Hungary is scarce. However, there are a few examples that provide some understanding of local racial hierarchies. Aniko Imre (2005) talks about the importance of whiteness in Hungary's self-definition as European. According to Imre, the assumed and silent whiteness is central to understanding Hungarian national discourse. Ian Law and Nikolay Zakharov (2019) claim that the drive to claim whiteness by Eastern Europeans can be viewed as a way of gaining the privileges associated with it. The privileges that came with being a white European were partially taken away from East European states during Socialism. "Returning" to Europe often means claiming their rightful and superior place in racialized hierarchies. The importance of white, Christian and European identity in the Hungarian national imagination can be seen clearly in Fidesz's discourse around migrants. For Hungary's right-wing nationalist government, distinguishing Hungarianness from racialized "Muslim immigrants" was one of the important strategies for mobilizing nationalist sentiments and popular support. As noted in chapter 3, Fidesz's anti-immigration campaign was, in fact, articulated as Hungary's attempt to protect not only itself but the whole of Europe from its cultural and racial others. Furthermore, the racialization of Hungary's internal others, such as its

Jewish and Roma populations, has been a significant aspect of political and social discourses in Hungary in the last decade. Jobbik, an ultra-right-wing party in the mid-2000s, organized its electoral campaign primarily around inciting hatred towards Roma and Jewish populations and managed to obtain around 15 % of the vote (Bíró-Nagy & Róna, 2013). Attacks on Roma communities or inside Budapest's Jewish district were and are still quite common in Hungary's daily life (Woodruff, 2014).

The existence of these racial hierarchies and racial violence was not unfamiliar to the participants of my research. Many expressed their outrage about the anti-Roma and anti-migrant campaigns of the past few years. None of the participants of this research would associate themselves with the right-wing discourse of racial hate or white supremacy. Despite this, concerns over racial justice were not viewed as important for feminist work. Integrating racial awareness into feminist politics, as noted above, was often seen as irrelevant for local feminist work and as a "Western imposition". Roma feminists, however, didn't view the erasure of race from feminist analysis as an innocent act. Magda, a well-known Roma feminist scholar who had published prolifically about Roma feminist movements and their marginalization in the mainstream feminist scholarship, commented:

I am talking [about] the structural discrimination based on race, gender and class. And this is the kind of analysis that is missing, not just the analysis but even the recognition of that. [...] Recognizing the fact of racialization that is disadvantaging Romani women.

According to Magda, it's not just an in-depth analysis of race that's missing from the Hungarian feminist discourse, but a minimal recognition of how Roma women are disadvantaged based on their race, class and gender. Magda's comment demonstrates that the dismissal of race as a contributor to social hierarchies of gender and social class erases the problems that Romani women face in Hungary and omits them from the broader feminist agenda.

Poverty, unemployment, lack of housing and access to education, segregation, and racial hatred-motivated violence are a few examples of inequality and discrimination that Roma communities face (Kóczé et al., 2019). In addition, Roma women also suffer further discrimination based on their gender (Jovanović et al., 2015). The erasure from feminist analyses and agenda, according to Magda, further contributes to the inequality of Roma women. When I asked her how the Hungarian feminist movement contributed to the inequalities that Roma women face in Hungary, she responded that “negligence itself is a contribution”. She elaborated:

It's a structural issue, and a result of what we are creating as agents and actively contributing to that, with our negligence, with our ignorance, with our lack of critical reflection, and that's a contribution. That is the reproduction of all kinds of impediments and all kinds of walls and obstacles which are in front of these people who are never ever able to overcome that.

For Magda, racialization functions on a structural level. Creating agents of change that neglect the specificities of racialized communities reproduce various structural barriers for them. Indeed, as Dean Spade (2015) argues in *Normal Life*, population-level interventions, wider-scale projects, actions and policies do not explicitly cast out a specific group from their benefits. However, they are often set up in ways that only benefit some people and disadvantage others.

Race-neutral initiatives of Hungarian feminism exclude Roma women from discussions of domestic violence. Campaigns and services for the victims of domestic or gender-based violence are usually set up for all women, but services benefit white and middle-class women more than those who are racialized and poor. For example, Réka explained that legal support provided by feminist organizations often is skewed towards those who are in more privileged positions:

With the legal stuff, [...] it's more skewed upwards, because people who enter legal battles and who start to realize that they have rights and they might be able to live with those rights or use those rights, tend to be more higher educated. But that doesn't mean that it's only women with diplomas, but you know not the

people... it's usually people who can read. So, there is a skewing when it comes to the legal part.

Réka's comment doesn't explicitly mention race as a barrier to accessing legal services tailored towards better-educated and middle-class women. However, according to Roma feminists who I interviewed, Roma communities in Hungary often struggle with accessing resources such as education, and many withdraw from school in order to support their families as soon as they reach high school. Hence, Roma women are less likely to benefit from services that assume women "realize that they have rights".

While legal support may be better utilized by middle-class women, services such as a helpline for the victim of gender-based violence are "open for everyone and [...] called from everywhere", Réka added. Such support may be important for all women, but in reality, neglecting the importance of race when conceptualizing gender-based violence may still result in context-unaware and therefore unhelpful service. Jázmin explained that discussing domestic or gender-based violence is difficult for Roma women because of the stigma that "Roma communities are so patriarchal". She said local feminist analyses "completely disregard the centuries-long enslavement [of Roma people] in Romania, which is still the heritage of the Roma families". They are unaware of "the violence against Roma men, which is leading to over-incarceration [and] lack of opportunities". The lack of understanding of the Romani context within feminist circles, the fear of incarceration of their partners or social stigma are often barriers for Roma women to access services provided by predominantly white feminist organizations. As Jázmin concluded: "It's always easy to pinpoint at a man [in case of gender-based violence] but to pinpoint at Roma men, as a white woman, I think, that's really problematic".

Race didn't figure in other conversations where it evidently affected the issue discussed. For example, as noted above, race never arose in the debate over sex work with any of the white Hungarian participants. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the importance of race in these debates was obvious for racialized participants. Jázmin commented on how difficult it is for white middle-class women to understand the concerns of racialized and poor Roma sex workers. She explained that Roma women are disproportionately disadvantaged in sex work:

There is so much talk whether sex work is this or that [...] and sex working women are evicted, they lose custody because they are sex workers and Roma. They are mistreated by judges, by the court and there is very little that is being done, not even a donation campaign for them is feasible because they are saying "sex work" instead of prostitution, and [feminists are saying] "we are not going to give money to them, and we are not going to lend our lawyer". So, it's a sad thing about it and it prevents actions, I think.

Jázmin's comment shows that framing sex work as a tension between sex-positive and abolitionist positions leaves out the lived realities of Roma women involved in sex work. She explained that Roma women usually engage in sex work in the streets and thus get more harassment from the police. They experience racism on the streets and within the courthouses. However, these experiences are not seen as important enough to be analyzed in the polarized feminist conversations about sex work. The dismissal of race as an important category for discussing sex work has negative consequences for Roma sex workers. They are deprived of services such as legal, social or financial support from feminist organizations.

The race-blindness of feminist organizations or networks in Hungary often serves as a barrier to Roma women's involvement in feminist work. Malvina, a younger Roma feminist, who had recently graduated from an MA program in gender studies and was just becoming involved in Roma feminist activism, explained there is a "big gap in communication" between white and Roma feminists:

Because of this gap that we have between us, I never had, for instance, the chance to, or I didn't search them like: “okay, now I want to come here and do activism with you or special events”.

Malvina has little desire to join feminist activities and has never done so. She explained her unwillingness is a result of existing or anticipated racism from feminist groups:

In Hungarian feminism, there is a big potential for racism. They don't have knowledge about us. So, I can't go back to the history. [...] We don't have history books [...]. Hungarians in general, they don't know anything about Roma. They know just from the media. The stereotypical images, and also about Roma women. So, they have an image about us that is very hard to challenge because we don't have so many access to those places where they are. [And] we have different types of topics on the agenda. We are we still facing with racism, they don't have this [...]. Class also comes here because Roma people [...] have worse economical situation in general, than, for instance, Hungarian women have. So there are so many aspects in which we are still struggling with and they are already above.

Malvina's narrative brings up concerns that Magda and Jázmin also expressed during the interviews. The lack of knowledge of Roma history and present circumstances results in stereotypical, racist understandings of Roma women and their lives. Jázmin, for example, explained that early marriages are one issue Roma feminists work and think about, but it is difficult to articulate this in a context unaware of Roma history or culture. According to her, early marriages originated in slavery. Pairing up a young woman with a Roma man as soon as she reached puberty, Jázmin said, was a way of protecting her from a slave owner. However, nowadays, even if it is a concern for Roma communities, “it is hard to say a right thing about this”. Roma feminists want to avoid the reproduction of stereotypes that Roma communities are ultimately patriarchal and thus it becomes difficult to engage with the topics that are not “contextualized like [they] should be” (Jázmin). Magda said that she focuses on the structural level of discrimination in her work and tries to avoid topics such as early and forced marriages because “these are the issues that are taken up by the feminists” (Magda). In Magda's discomfort

with talking about internal issues within Roma communities, we can see her attempt to avoid further stereotyping of Roma women. She is aware that topics such as early marriages are easily taken up by privileged feminist groups, who will often pose as more advanced saviours of racialized women. Post-colonial feminisms have challenged this dynamic between white and women of colour feminisms since the early 90s (Bracke, 2012; Mohanty, 1997; Spivak, 1991). However, in Hungary, challenging such a discourse is harder because race is treated as irrelevant to understanding local realities by most white feminist actors. Malvina brings other concerns that Roma women face, such as lack of access to education or informational platforms, economic hardship, and the experience of everyday racism – issues that did not come up in the interviews with non-Roma feminists, demonstrating once again that the refusal of engaging with race as an analytic category ignores the lives and experiences of Roma women and silences Roma voices.

It is worth noting that despite the refusal to understand race as an analytic category, Roma women are sometimes included in feminist forums or activities. However, Roma feminist participants I interviewed criticize such attempts of inclusion as tokenistic. According to Magda, the attempts of inclusion often involve inviting a single Roma person to a feminist conference. Such invitations, according to her, serve as “ticking a box” instead of challenging systematic racism. Magda explained that Roma women are usually seen as beneficiaries of feminist services, but a “serious engagement and reflection on how feminist movement contributed to the reproduction of such an inequality” is often missing. Jázmin went even further and stated that often the selected Roma participants of various feminist forums were those who comply with the politics of respectability of the mainstream feminist movement. She said:

Mainstream feminists involve Roma intellectuals and women when it's convenient for them when they say the right narrative [...]. when it's about poor Roma

women who are matching their image of what a respectable Roma woman should be.

In addition, according to Jázmin, the narratives about “sex workers, trans women, drug users” on these forums are “totally victimizing”. Jázmin’s and Magda’s comments show that even when mainstream feminist groups try to include Roma women in their conversations, they ensure the guests conform to the mainstream feminist discourse. Roma women are expected to either present themselves as respectable women or victims of patriarchy demonstrating, once again, how feminist attempts to include Roma women often reproduce existing inequalities.

The narratives of Roma feminists discussed in this section tell us that not only do feminist leftist thinkers diverge from anti-colonial discourses and traditions, but their dismissal of race and their race-blindness further disadvantage racialized women in Hungary. Their engagement with anti-colonial argumentation is only partial and can sometimes privilege the dominant communities instead of allying with the marginalized. In this anti-gender feminism’s use of anti-colonial sentiments is similar to the use of anti-colonial rhetoric by the right-wing actors. I discuss this similarity in the last section of this chapter.

[Anti-colonial Undertones of Right-wing and Feminist anti-genderisms](#)

In their recent book titled *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2021, 92) claim that the key to the success of right-wing, anti-gender movements in Eastern Europe is their “discursive appropriation” of anti-colonial rhetoric. Right-wing discourse constructs a binary between exploited local populations and the powerful global elites in order to mobilize nationalist sentiments. In this binary, gender equality-oriented practices are constructed as attempts to colonize local traditions and cultures and are sometimes compared to totalitarian regimes such as Nazism or Communism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2017). However, according to Graff and Korolczuk, the deployment of anti-colonial sensibilities does

not align right-wing movements with post-colonial theory. In fact, they use the discourse of victimhood to justify violence as self-defence. Racialized, gendered or sexualized violence within right-wing discourse is indeed often articulated as a defence from allegedly totalitarian ideologies such as liberalism or “rampant individualism”. Importantly, the authors note that the use of anti-colonial discourse used by the right-wing is often detached from the actual histories and present-day realities of colonialism. The concept of colonialism is instead turned into a metaphor describing the “arrogance of Western liberal elites” making it effective in countries such as Poland or Hungary that don’t share colonial histories with the Global South (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021, 93). Lastly, the anti-colonial rhetoric of the right-wing, the authors claim, effectively combines the critique of cultural colonialism with the critique of economic colonialism and depicts feminism as a trojan horse covering up both economic and cultural exploitation carried out by the West.

As discussed in the chapter 5, right-wing anti-gender and feminist anti-gender stances substantially differ from each other. Anti-gender feminism aims at destructing patriarchal and familial gender norms while the right-wing actors declare heteronormative and socially conservative family and gender roles as a core of sovereign and national identity (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). Their approaches differ in terms of race too. Feminist actors in Hungary were appalled by the racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric and politics of the government. However, there are also some similarities between their use of anti-colonial rhetoric.

Both feminist and right-wing anti-gender discourses engage in their critique of the colonialism of the West. The critique of economic and ideological dominance of Western neoliberal ideas has some validity. However, none of these discourses are actively allying or associating themselves with the so-called “Global South” or with the marginalized global actors.

The treatment of immigrants by Hungary's right-wing government is a good example of this lack of "colonial" identification with the Global South: Hungarian nationalistic discourse imagines itself as dominated by the West, yet it still claims Hungary belongs to white, Christian and European families. Anti-gender feminist discourse similarly critiques the dominance of Western feminist conceptualizations of gender or feminism but doesn't align itself with marginalized and racialized groups either. It still prefers Western, white and Marxist theoretical frameworks to analyze and justify Hungary's uniqueness and it privileges white heterosexual women's needs. This is well exemplified by Malvina's comment. She said:

I like lesbian feminism, or lesbian coloured feminism, women of colour feminism, or transgender women of colour feminism, or even white transgender feminisms because the position of marginalizing is still the same somehow. Of course, it's different in many ways, but we all share this kind of position, and this is what makes us to move. And Hungarian heterosexual feminism doesn't have it because they are also supported by heterosexuality.

Malvina, a Roma feminist, is describing how her feminist politics differ from predominantly white feminist movements in Hungary. Malvina's comment shows that anti-gender or leftist feminist discourse, unlike hers, doesn't affiliate itself with less mainstream voices, such as women of colour or trans feminisms. It is supported by heterosexuality, and I would add, by whiteness. Non-dominant voices, in the Hungarian context, find more similarities with other marginalized feminisms than with the dominant leftist feminist discourse. Hungarian leftist and anti-gender feminist discourse claims its marginalized position vis-à-vis the West but obfuscates its entrenchment in dominant structures, such as cisgenderism, heterosexism and whiteness. Thus, it cannot align itself with other marginalized struggles.

Similarities between leftist and right-wing discourses were sometimes pointed out by respondents who were critical of the essentialist and heteronormative nature of Hungarian

feminism. Feminist narratives were sometimes even seen as nationalistic. For example, Márta, a feminist and a queer organizer, noted:

There is this post-socialist feminist discourse [that] the feminism that came from the West doesn't apply to us; we have different problems. There is also this rhetoric that they want to bring this Western feminism, but we have our own, and we have different issues to deal with [...] which connects with the xenophobic discourse because we are so special. And it also connects to [...] the linguistic isolation of Hungary. you know there is no relative of Hungarian language anywhere [...] it's alone. [...] So, there is this double [perspective]: “Oh we are so oppressed”. And that's why there are so many inferior complexes but, in fact, we are a greater nation, our language is more complex. We gave so many noble prize winners to the world. [...] So, there is this national pride which, of course, not all feminists are critical of this.

Márta observes that the claim to difference and uniqueness, often articulated through anti-colonial rhetoric, can serve as a tool for mobilizing sentiments over a nation's greatness and even its superiority. As Michael, a scholar of sexualities in Hungarian and Eastern European contexts explained, such banal manifestations of nationalism are “atmospheric”, “they are everywhere”, and thus, it is easy to “slide into” them. The contested relationship between feminisms and nationalisms has long been a topic of scholarly enquiry (Heng, 1996; Herr, 2003; Jacoby, 1999), but what we see in the Hungarian feminist attempt to distance itself from “liberal” strands of Western feminisms or from trans and sex workers' rights movements, is that, similar to right-wing actors, they try to position themselves as authentic and people-oriented in relation to the Hungarian nation. Michael continued: “there's [...] a desire on the part of some Hungarian feminists, to sort of play this, a little bit of a National card themselves and to associate themselves [...] with a feminism that isn't quite so non-Hungarian”.

Feminist attempts to play, as Michael put it, “a little bit of a National card”, also privilege feminist strategies that appeal to popular opinion, a strategy not so different from the right-wing agenda. Dézi, a transgender activist, cautiously commented:

Some organizations do really great work on specific issues, [...] but I'm afraid most of the main discourse is about [...], women having children and whatever because that's how the government frames gender issues. So, I mean that's a huge shift, which comes because of this government, that basically those issues which should be and could be discussed are not discussed anymore. Because women are here to do the housework and to have children and not to participate in social or political or whatever life. So that influences a lot on how feminism goes about.

Dézi, an outsider observing feminist work, noticed a change in mainstream feminist discourse as it started to privilege issues such as childbirth or domestic work. Unlike right-wing anti-gender actors, feminist movements do not support the patriarchal organizing of women's labour or domestic life. However, the privileging of issues of cisgender, Hungarian, heterosexual and married Hungarian women, illustrates how dominant feminist frameworks in Hungary have shifted to accommodate or respond to the right-wing climate.

Some of my respondents observed that the critique of gender ideology by the government is quite similar to the Hungarian feminist critique of trans rights discourse. Orsolya explained:

So, reading more and more about this, we discovered that there is something which we agree with what the Right is saying that... I don't agree that there are... these very philosophical ideas that we should use the same toilet because there are no women and men, there is third sex, and that you are whatever you like, and you can choose your gender. and this whole gender/queer theory to me is very difficult to understand and I think it's very dangerous for women's sex-based rights.

Thus, similar to right-wing anti-gender discourse, anti-gender feminist discourse considers discussions over the fluidity of gender or the two-sex model dangerous for the audience they claim to represent. If the right-wing is claiming to represent the interests of 'common people', anti-gender feminism aims to become a voice for 'common women'. Both discourses engage in populist rhetoric in representing 'common people' or 'common women',

and in both cases threat comes from the dominance of “liberal” and Western ideas over local priorities and values.

Sometimes, the convergence between feminist and right-wing rhetoric was viewed as positive. For example, Vilma told me a story that her work on pornography got support and appreciation from conservative women’s groups. When I asked how she felt about it, she responded:

I think that it is a very good symbol [...] of what the left and the feminist side are missing. That we are not concerned about industries anymore, we are concerned about debating identities and people even if it's hateful, even if it's lying, even if it's propaganda, people keep voting to the right because they actually name the problem.

Vilma’s comment shows that the concern over prioritizing the “real problems” of “people” is shared by anti-gender feminists and right-wing groups. Both view “identity-focused” feminism as detached and foreign and instead want to “actually name” existing, local problems. According to Vilma, if right-wing and feminist positions share the same position on particular issues, like their understanding of the harms of pornography, this only underlines the deficiencies of identity-obsessed feminist politics.

In this chapter, I have argued that anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungary deploys anti-colonial sentiments in its critique of the economic and ideological dominance of the Western states and the framework of liberal democracy. However, the strategies devised by the anti-gender feminists for responding to the alienation of feminism due to its association with neoliberal frameworks depart from post-colonial and decolonial perspectives. Leftist and anti-gender feminist frameworks in Hungary privilege economic critiques of neoliberalism, utilizing Western and Marxist theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, anti-gender feminist theorizing in Hungary disregards the importance of race in feminist politics and presents intersectional

analysis as another imposition from the West. The predominant whiteness of the Hungarian feminist movement remains invisible and silences the voices of racialized women. The anti-colonial arguments articulated by anti-gender feminists in Hungary closely align with anti-colonial sentiments of right-wing movements in Hungary.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This dissertation argued that the hostile right-wing anti-gender climate in Hungary created a fertile ground for the emergence and discursive dominance of anti-gender feminism in Hungary. Based on the data of my ethnographic research of the feminist scene in Budapest, I outlined the major impacts of the right-wing anti-gender climate on feminist actors and the ways they cope with it. Next, I discussed how surviving and strategizing against anti-gender political accusations became central to the debates and conversations about topics such as trans inclusion and sex work, and to a lesser extent, racial justice amongst feminists. Drawing on arguments articulated in relation to the debated issues I outlined, the emergence of a new feminist discourse, which aimed at defending feminism within the hostile climate and maintaining its legitimacy in the public's eye. I called this feminism anti-gender feminism. The main characteristics of anti-gender feminism were a) its insistence on defining gender as an analytic concept addressing the inequalities between men and women; b) its focus on "local" problems instead of following Western feminist agendas; embeddedness in leftist political perspectives; c) a focus on addressing the needs of the "average women"; and finally d) presenting oneself as a new, more progressive way of doing feminism. I also demonstrated that in its attempt to redefine the feminist agenda and goals for surviving within the right-wing anti-gender climate, anti-gender feminism distanced itself from the marginalized struggles of the sex-workers, trans communities and women of colour. Finally, I discussed how anti-gender feminism, while presenting itself as a progressive or a critical approach to mainstream feminist politics, was detached from other critical feminist projects, such as post-colonial and decolonial feminisms. It was detached from these projects by refusing to acknowledge its own theoretical or practical embeddedness in whiteness and depicting race as an irrelevant category for feminist politics in Hungary. In

addition, it is detached from these projects by failing to acknowledge its own whiteness or understand the impacts of race-blind feminist politics on Roma women and their needs. Last but not least, the anti-colonial sentiments voiced in anti-gender feminist discourses were often strikingly similar to the instrumental use of anti-colonial arguments by the right-wing actors who utilized the discourse of marginalization in order to justify their racist, sexist and homophobic perspectives. Based on this analysis I concluded that anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungary emerged as a strategy to counter right-wing anti-gender accusations towards feminist work which depicts feminism as a danger, threatening the survival of the Hungarian nation and an ideology imposed on Hungary by Western liberal elites. However, the goal of anti-gender feminism to reclaim feminist politics as relevant to the majority of Hungarian women and not a threat, also lead it to separate itself from other marginalized struggles in the country, such as the struggles of the sex-workers, trans communities and racialized women.

In Chapter 1, I introduced my research questions and main findings of the research. In this chapter I also reviewed existing literature on anti-gender campaigns and discourses. I demonstrated that while anti-gender movements have been theorized and discussed thoroughly by scholars in Europe and globally, there is somewhat limited knowledge about the impacts of anti-gender campaigns on feminist movements. My dissertation aimed to address this gap in knowledge by looking at the impacts of state-embraced anti-gender rhetoric on the feminist movement in Hungary.

In Chapter 2, I discussed my research methodology. I conducted ethnographic research for this dissertation in the Fall of 2019, soon after Hungary's right-wing government closed Gender Studies programs in the country and incorporated anti-gender arguments in its traditionalist and patriarchal, nationalist-populist rhetoric. During the research, I spent two

months in Budapest where I interviewed thirty-nine feminist actors and attended various feminist forums, protests and discussions. My ethnographic research was guided by the principles of feminist ethnography, which asks for an intersectional approach to the research, self-reflexivity of a researcher, and is committed to feminist politics. These tenants of feminist ethnography helped me navigate my position as a researcher during the fieldwork and shaped my research.

I was intentional in reaching out to a diversity of feminist groups, activist and academic, representing various generations and perspectives. I talked with feminist scholars in all major universities that have gender components to their research and teaching and to the representatives of almost all active and visible feminist organizations. I also talked with newer and less-organized feminist activist groups and less-established academics. Since the discussions about feminist politics of inclusivity were so central to this research, I incorporated the voices of the LGBTQ+ community, trans community, sex-worker advocacy groups, and Roma feminists.

I was aware of my social and political position vis-à-vis the participants of this research. As a fellow activist from Georgia, an eastern margin of Eastern Europe, and as someone who had spent a few years of her life in Hungary, I was privileged to be perceived as a relatable colleague and as someone who understands the complexities of the local struggles by my participants. The shared commitment to feminist political agendas and shared knowledge of the anti-feminist and anti-gender arguments helped me have in-depth and rich conversations with the fellow feminists. However, I was also aware of my institutional embeddedness into Western academic structures and feminist frameworks, which led me to be extremely diligent in accurately representing feminist arguments and discussions in Hungary, even when my politics significantly diverged from them.

Chapter 3 provided the contextual and historical overview of the right-wing populist nationalism of the Hungarian government during last decade as well as a description of feminist activism and academia in post-socialist Hungary. In this chapter, I discussed how Fidesz's populist-nationalism is entangled with anti-gender rhetoric of the party. I also demonstrated how feminist movement in post-socialist Hungary is closely tied with the ideas of "democratization" and "Europisation" and is hence vulnerable to state's anti-gender and populist-national critiques.

In Chapter 4, I talked about the impacts of the right-wing anti-gender political climate on feminist academia and activism in Hungary. One of the main findings of the research was that the state's anti-gender discourse, grounded in nationalist-populist rhetoric, significantly affected feminist scholars and activists in the country. It changed the social and political positioning of feminism by exposing it as the central danger to the very survival of the Hungarian nation. Before the intensification of the right-wing discourse in the country, feminist work was sometimes welcomed, and other times disliked or ignored as unimportant. However, in either cases feminist struggles were rarely perceived as relevant to so-called "real politics". This provided an opening for feminist actors to function in academic or activist spaces almost obstacle free. However, Fidesz's anti-gender and right-wing government redefined feminism as a political opposition to the governing party, a foreign ideology threatening the very existence of Hungarian society. The hostility towards feminist politics, on one hand, contributed to the increased support and embracement of feminist politics within Hungary's smaller and oppositional liberal circles. On the other hand, it presented various challenges to the continuation of feminist work. It made the academic standing and career opportunities of scholars in less supportive institutions vulnerable, increased media and far-right group attacks on various feminist and LGBTQ

initiatives or events, and resulted in decreased funding to feminist projects. Overall, it made the situation of feminist scholars and academics precarious.

The respondents of this research discussed various ways they coped with the hostile climate. Some, especially those whose social or career positioning was better established than others, were openly confrontational in their politics and actions. They continued their work openly and publicly, including their criticism of the government. Others found it important to employ strategic language and actions to be able to continue their work for the feminist cause. This included participating in discussions about demography or family but introducing a feminist perspective or replacing the terms such as feminism or gender with women or mothers in their public communication. I analyzed these practices as a version of what Spivak has defined as strategic essentialism – a self-aware strategy of using particular essentialisms for achieving short-term political goals. I explained that these examples of the use of strategic essentialism were different from the newly emergent yet dominant anti-gender feminist discourse which embraced essentialist perspectives not only for their strategic nature but as a “right” way of defining gender and feminism. Finally, many activists and scholars left Hungary in order to escape the repressive climate in the country. Stories of those who had decided to immigrate revealed that immigration was mainly a choice for finding a more supportive political climate and didn’t contribute to furthering their career or other professional goals.

In Chapter 5, I discussed the emergence of anti-gender feminism in relation to local feminist debates about trans inclusion, sex work and, to a lesser extent, racial justice. Conversations about these topics among various feminist groups were happening in the context of finding the best strategies for defending feminist struggles and evading right-wing and anti-gender accusations towards feminist actors. In the context of trans inclusion, the discussions

about defining the concept of gender were most important. The dominant discourse among feminist groups argued that since the state's anti-gender discourse depicts gender as an ideology (which under the guise of gender equality promotes "unnatural" and multiple possibilities of gender and sexual identifications), it was a central task for feminist actors to reclaim the definition of gender that understood it as an analytic concept describing inequalities between men and women. Feminists expressed concerns about the Hungarian majority thinking of the concept of gender as related to trans gender identification or sexual diversity and claimed that feminist notion of gender should focus not on "identity politics" but on the needs of women. In the context of this discussion many of the respondents argued that defining gender as a potential identity that can be trans was harmful for feminist causes and insisted on understanding sex as a biological given upon which hierarchical gender roles were constructed. Some even blamed trans movements for contributing to the right-wing cause by having conversations about multiplicity of gender identities, because the right-wing utilized these conversations as proof of the destruction that gender ideology can bring. It is in this context that a few of the respondents claimed that feminism itself was anti-gender. They argued that feminism was anti-gender insofar as it wanted to eliminate socially-constructed and hierarchical gender norms, while the right-wing actors wanted to reinstate them. The arguments about the anti-gender nature of feminism were usually articulated together with a few other claims about the strategies and forms of effective feminist politics in the right-wing and anti-gender context. I called this group of arguments "anti-gender feminist discourse".

In addition to insisting on one particular definition of the concept of gender, anti-gender feminist discourse claimed that in order to refute right-wing anti-gender discourse which depicted feminism and gender as foreign threats imposed onto Hungarians by the liberal elites,

feminism needed to better appeal to the interests of the majority of the “people”. This argument was usually articulated within the framework of leftist theoretical orientation. The leftist theoretical grounding of anti-gender feminist arguments was usually depicted as a new, more progressive way of doing feminist work, in opposition to following a “liberal” paradigm, which according to the participants had alienated feminism from average Hungarians. According to this argument, Western-imposed liberal politics, such as sex-workers’ rights, embracement of trans identities or intersectional approaches were not relevant to the everyday concerns of Hungarian women. Adequate and relevant feminist politics, according to them, would be more focused on women’s labour rights, domestic work and other issues connected with reproductive labour. This kind of feminist politics and its desire to appeal to “average women’s” concerns, however, also required ostracizing and criticizing attempts to work on sex-worker or trans community rights or appeals to intersectional justice, and instead centered on the needs of white, cisgender, heterosexual Hungarian women. Since Hungarian feminist circles are predominantly white and middle-class, their blindness to the concerns of racialized women, sex workers and trans folk were seen as a result of feminist groups’ social positioning by racialized and otherwise marginalized participants. Finally, as anti-gender feminist discourse claimed it was capable of addressing the shortcomings of feminist politics that had contributed to the massive public appeal of the right-wing anti-gender arguments, it was usually talked about as a new and a critical discourse and had gained discursive dominance among feminist actors. A few of the respondents described to me how they had changed their position on the topics of sex-work or trans rights in recent years and embraced more leftist or as they called it “structuralist” approaches to gender justice. Even those participants who disagreed with some of the major claims of the anti-gender feminist discourse were careful in articulating their position for fear of

being labeled as naïve, unaware or even harmful. This especially affected younger feminist actors who were just establishing themselves within feminist circles. In the Hungarian anti-gender context, according to my research, anti-gender feminism had emerged as a strategy for overcoming obstacles presented to feminism by the hostile climate and it had managed to establish itself as the only viable and adequate political strategy for rescuing the feminist future.

In Chapter 6, I analyzed the critical claims and anti-colonial sensibilities present in anti-gender feminism in relation to other critical feminist projects such as post-colonial and decolonial feminisms. I outlined that the anti-colonial sensibilities present in anti-gender feminist discourse, especially towards the global asymmetries reproduced within feminism and by feminists transnationally, had justifiable grounds. However, anti-gender feminists' critiques of the dominance of Western theories or frameworks, while partially similar to post-colonial and decolonial projects, were also quite detached from them. Anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungary privileged economic theoretical frames and North American Marxist analysis by white scholars in articulating their discontents, unlike post and decolonial projects which are more mindful of transnational racial and other symbolic inequalities and geopolitics of knowledge, especially, in recent years. The dismissal of race as an important analytic category, as well as a lack of self-reflexive approach to its own whiteness, distanced anti-gender feminist discourse from post-colonial and decolonial perspectives, which center their analysis on unpacking the constructions of racialized hierarchies. It also ignored the concerns of the racialized women in Hungary, such as Roma women. At the end of Chapter 6, I demonstrated that the anti-gender feminist discourse shared similarities with the anti-gender discourses of the Hungarian government grounded in populist-nationalism. Anti-gender feminism insisted on prioritizing the needs of the “average” and “majority” of presumably white heterosexual Hungarian women and

at the same time claimed a marginalized position vis-a-vis broadly conceived Western feminisms. Such articulation of anti-colonial sentiments, as Graff and Korolchuck argue, is typical of the current right-wing across various places, who will present themselves as the victims of the liberal dominance in order to justify their heterosexist and racist policies and arguments. Some respondents who were critical of the dominance of the anti-gender feminist discourse within Hungarian feminist circles saw their arguments as closely allied with the state's majoritarian national project. Anti-gender feminist discourse, while trying to create an opposition to the state-orchestrated anti-gender and anti-feminist politics, was accommodating to it on multiple levels.

Research Relevance

The findings of this research focus on the tensions and political discussions within the Hungarian feminism movement, but these observations are relevant for conversations about feminisms and right-wing anti-genderisms transnationally. Especially in the current global political context, where we see a drastic increase of the right-wing movements and politics in Eastern and Western Europe, in South and North America, South East Asia, etc. Two of the central arguments that the right-wing anti-gender rhetoric articulates in relation to feminism or other progressive social movements are that gender ideology threatens the very existence of humankind by presenting multiplicity of gender and sexual identifications and that gender theorists are forcing a liberal (and sometimes Western) agenda on the common people. Anti-gender feminist discourse in Hungary was devised to address these accusations by insisting on an essentialist definition of gender and resorting to the so-called leftist approach to unpacking inequalities. Considering a coherent and transnational character of the right-wing anti-gender rhetoric, it would be safe to assume that anti-gender campaigns pose similar challenges for local

feminist actors elsewhere too (on the transnational similarities between various anti-gender campaigns see Kováts & Poim, 2015 and Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). This research unpacks the strategies that Hungarian feminist circles adopted for opposing the right-wing anti-gender climate in the country and, at the same time, demonstrates some of its shortcomings. It shows that anti-gender feminist discourse may seem like a theoretically-grounded and an adequate way for defending feminism from the right-wing attacks, but it also shows the shortcomings of the feminist anti-genderism. The research demonstrates that a feminist desire to oppose alienation and reach out to the wider public contains the danger of narrowing the boundaries of a feminist project. It can result in exclusion and hostility towards multiple groups of women, such as sex workers, racialised women, trans women, and the trans community in general. The attempt to bring feminism closer to the “people” reproduces the populist-nationalist politics of the right-wing government. And despite its desire to achieve gender equality (unlike right-wing actors), anti-gender feminism relies on exclusive and majoritarian arguments of victimhood, typical to the current right-wing actors. Conversations about intersectionality, trans inclusion or sex work are ongoing among feminist circles in multiple places (see Elliot, 2009; Gerassi, 2015). The rise of the right-wing anti-gender movements, which explicitly target women’s and trans rights and aim to maintain the dominance of whiteness and hierarchical, patriarchal societal structures introduces a new layer to these conversations. For feminist movements and theory transnationally, it is important to unpack the ways the conversations about these topics were shaped by the right-wing anti-gender climate in Hungary and avoid some of the pitfalls of the anti-gender feminist discourse.

More broadly, this dissertation fits into and contributes to the long history of feminist conversations about feminist politics and their relationship with nationalisms. Literature focusing

on unpacking the relationship between nationalism and gender demonstrates that not only do nationalist projects shape the norms of femininities and masculinities or gender-relations, but they require loyalty towards these norms by everyone, often including those who these norms exclude (Mosse, 1985). For example, in his classic analysis of sexualities and nationalisms in modern Europe, George Mosse (1985) claimed that the national norms of respectability were often embraced by the groups rendered as deviant within those very norms, such as lesbians and homosexuals. Within post-colonial feminist conversations, debates about the extent to which feminist movements should embrace anti-colonial nationalisms were also crucial. Becoming part of anti-colonial nationalist struggles was often seen as an avenue for women to initiate change, however, feminist concerns as well as activist women were often dismissed and ignored by nationalist movements after achieving independence (Heng, 1996; Loomba, 2015; McClintock, 1993; McLeod, 2010). In addition, white feminists' involvement in spreading colonial ideologies, now known as imperial feminism, is central for understanding how feminism can function as a handmaiden to imperial nationalist ideologies in the name of women's rights (Bracke, 2012). More recently, examples of embracement of nationalist sentiments by LGBTQ+ communities and activist groups were exposed and labelled as homonationalism by Jasbir Puar (2007), and the mobilization of anti-Muslim sentiments in the name of feminism within Western European nations was called femonationalism by Sarah R Farris (2017).

This dissertation contributes to conversations about ways nationalist ideologies often make their way into feminist claims and politics by depicting how the right-wing anti-gender political context contributed to the emergence of a new type of majoritarian, white-dominated and white-women oriented, trans and sex-worker exclusive feminist politic in Hungary. I call this type of feminism “anti-gender” as it emerged specifically in response to nationalist and populist

anti-gender accusations of the state, but in its attempts to counter state anti-genderism embraced some of its major elements.

Existing literature on the emergence of the anti-gender campaigns and movements emphasizes their embeddedness in right-wing, nationalist and populist politics, but insists on analysing the phenomenon in its own right. Anti-gender rhetoric fits into other patriarchal ideologies, but it is unique for its emphasis on the concept of gender as a threatening ideology, for its origins within the Catholic Church and for the similarities among its transnational variations. This dissertation shows that not only is the right-wing anti-gender discourse specific in what kind of challenges it presents to the feminist actors, but in the Hungarian case it also has created a ground for the emergence of anti-gender feminism – a type of feminist discourse devised specifically to defend feminism from the anti-gender accusations. In this sense, the concept of anti-gender feminism demonstrates a new configuration of how nationalist-populist and feminist projects contradict and converge with each other. Analysis of the anti-gender feminist project and especially its insistence on the majoritarian politics as an effective way to continue feminist work in the right-wing anti-gender context requires critical reflection on potentially harmful impacts of the rise of the anti-gender campaigns on feminist politics transnationally.

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