

INTRODUCTION

While Oxford Analytica and other for-profit opinion polling firms forecast global geopolitical developments with increasing sophistication and build ever more powerful databases, it remains a mystery which segments of Hungarian society placed blind trust in Viktor Orbán's governments in successive elections since 2010. Although one of Hungary's most prominent opinion pollsters, the Republikon Institute, has explicitly referred to Fidesz as a "women's party," it is not well established that Fidesz is kept in power mainly because of female voters. One thing is for sure: In 2022, Fidesz won the elections for the fourth time in a row, with just over 3 million votes, about half of the total votes cast for party lists. The governing party coalition has had the electoral authorization to change the constitution and transform Hungary's legal infrastructure in a way that led the country away from democracy.

What may be the reason for the Republikon Institute to call the Orbán-led Fidesz a "women's party"? Analysts argue that Fidesz had a stable share of women voters, around 55 percent during the period in opposition (2002-10) and in the early 2010s. They gradually increased their popularity among women to 60 percent by the end of the 2010s. The higher proportion of female supporters may be linked to Fidesz's tactful communication of its family policy and its self-identification of being family-friendly.

This analysis, however, provides information only about those (female) voters who, when asked by pollsters, stated they would vote in the upcoming elections. An inner circle of voters, the core supporters, tend to vote for a party out of identification instead of perceived or genuine material interest. Supporting the chosen

political group is an integral part of their identity, independent of rational arguments. In the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, roughly 8.2 million citizens were eligible to vote. Political analysts estimate that around 1.8 million of these citizens form the core support base of Fidesz. Based on the 2023 analysis by the Republikon Institute, this means that 60 percent of these voters supporting the governing party, almost 1.1 million, were women. There is no reliable, publicly available data on whether women or men accounted for the additional 2 million votes for Fidesz in 2022. Nor is it known whom the remaining female voters, roughly 3 million women, voted for.

It is not easy to get a clearer picture, as several Fidesz-affiliated think tanks regularly publish results on perceived or actual voting behavior. These publications influence rather than measure voting preferences by consistently conveying overwhelming support for and eligibility of the governing party. It is common practice for these institutions to probe (or, as some argue, influence) Hungarian voters' opinions on parties or politicians through telephone surveys. Various articles in the independent media have uncovered how the so-called opinion pollsters use suggestive questions and statements in their so-called inquiries. The answers to the suggestive questions are usually used to confirm the predesigned result. It is then widely disseminated by government-financed news outlets and used as objective data to justify the opinions of hundreds of influencers on social media platforms that support government propaganda. One such company, Társadalomkutató Ltd., for example, published the latest results of its "research" on March 8, 2024, International Women's Day, stating that more women than men support Fidesz. Expecting political gains, the Hungarian government can thus use a rigged poll, together with the lack of accessible alternative data, to claim, without much evidence, that its actions are not only bringing political gains but are also supported by women.

Unchanged roles in society

Despite poll uncertainties about party preferences, it is undeniable that Viktor Orbán has identified the Hungarian electorate's most important material and emotional needs with remarkable accuracy and sensitivity. By leveraging his sensitivity to his voters' needs and the propaganda machine he built to reshape and reinforce them, Orbán has repeatedly communicated, with extraordinary effectiveness, that Fidesz is the only political force that cares about the issues that fundamentally affect women's daily lives. This was only possible because the needs of women were almost entirely ignored by the previous socialist-liberal party coalitions (2002-10).

The prime minister's political program is relatively straightforward. Regarding his government's policies, he does not intend to change social attitudes or to support men and women in sharing household unpaid work or in managing the family budget through more diversified labor market participation. Instead, Orbán never misses an opportunity to publicly celebrate women who take on traditional caring responsibilities. He also likes referring to the Hungarian way of traditional macho behavior, such as drinking strong alcohol, valuing meat-loaded, cholesterol-heavy, decadent feasts, and being capable of hard physical work.

With the slogan of family-friendliness, as we will discuss in detail, Orbán applies demographic populism to continuously fighting the demographic crisis, namely, Hungary's unsustainably low birth rates. Prominent figures in the Hungarian government address this problem by promoting the "traditional way of life." According to this, women are expected to bear more children as their primary task, while men, being cared for by their wives, will happily and successfully provide for their families. Government policies are communicated in simple terms. The most important part of the state benefits supporting this policy is a tax bo-

nus available to parents. The tax allowance, a reduction in income taxes, depends on the number of children in the family. However, it is not necessarily reimbursed to the children's mothers; rather, it is, quite logically, reimbursed to the family member with the higher wages. In most cases, this is the father. Although the support is called a "family tax allowance," it is usually deposited into the bank account of the man of the family.

By the same logic, the other component of the so-called family-friendly policy, state-subsidized loans for housing, is not available to single parents (primarily mothers, many women with children) or homosexual couples (incapable of legally marrying each other in Hungary). Both groups are deprived of this support. Additionally, not all Hungarian citizens are eligible to adopt a child in state care; only married couples are eligible. The reinforcement of traditional social norms and hierarchies is deeply rooted in Hungarian society, and the so-called family-friendly policies were welcomed by many. Families provide security amid the current chaos, uncertainty, and dysfunction. Families were the only institutions providing a safety net amid growing external insecurity caused by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple wars, and financial crises. Ultimately, the state only cares for a few of its citizens.

During the fall of state socialism after 1990, women, just as much as men, were expected to adjust to the drastic economic changes. State institutions that had previously been relatively reliable in providing accessible and affordable care services began to crack within a few years. While the transformation of labor market opportunities has led to significant mobility within the country, especially from villages to larger towns and cities, it has resulted in depopulation in one region and overpopulation in another. The reorganization of nursing homes and kindergartens, health-care facilities, and elderly homes did not follow these developments.

This placed a considerable burden on women, who, under the traditional division of labor, were expected to be responsible for most childcare and eldercare, despite the higher demands of paid work. This was particularly difficult for those whose husbands, who had previously provided the family with a stable income, were struggling to remain employed in a competitive labor market.

As discussed in the following chapters, the socialist-style “state-induced feminism” did not result in the de facto equality of women and men before the fall of communism. Although women were employed in large numbers, the traditional distribution of unpaid household work remained unchanged. Women mainly performed domestic work, household chores, childcare, and eldercare. To address the shortages of daycare facilities and qualified nursery or hospital staff, the Hungarian communist government introduced a unique three-year period of paid maternity leave for new mothers in the 1960s. This resulted in women becoming accustomed to being absent from the labor market for extended periods, up to six to eight years or more if they had multiple children. While this has become a social norm, it also limits women’s career options and decreases their income in comparison with men. The governments building the new, democratic Hungary after 1989 did little to reduce the burden of unpaid care on women. As men were largely exempt from household responsibilities, giving them greater flexibility in their schedules and the possibility of building a network of informal contacts and obtaining resources after working hours, women did not stand a real chance of competing with them in the labor market. Since Hungary’s democratization, successive governments have shown a complete lack of commitment to tackling these structural inequalities. Despite the dominance of left-liberal governments until 2010, women continued to be marginalized in the political sphere. Although women’s NGOs grounded in human rights values were founded in the 1990s,

these organizations would have needed greater lobbying power to change women's everyday realities. Viktor Orbán, who regained power in 2010 and redefined his initially liberal party, recognized the structural problems Hungarian women faced and filled the void left untouched for two decades by the previous elite.

Christian, conservative, national

Fidesz won its first parliamentary election in democratizing Hungary in 1998. The party, which at the time defined itself as a civic conservative party, had to reinvent the conservative approach to women's political representation. Moreover, a new political program and infrastructure had to be built from scratch after 50 years of enforced hiatus under communist rule, which forcibly eliminated all other political movements after 1945. Although there were historical examples of conservative women's politics before World War II, given that, from the 1990s, a new infrastructure and political program needed to be invented, conservative women's politics were no different from human rights-based feminist policies. Without the Orbán government's hijacking, conservative feminism could thrive in Hungary today, as Christian conservative women's activism flourished several decades ago and, before the Soviet influence over Hungary after World War II, had a long tradition. The best-known Hungarian representative of the Christian feminist movement was Margit Slachta, who was not only the first woman to serve in the Hungarian parliament (in 1920) but also a Catholic nun. She fought relentlessly and militantly for women's rights as a representative of Christian feminism.

Such values-driven conservative women's advocacy could have quite a lot to offer in today's Hungary on issues such as the housing crisis, obstetric violence, the inequalities of public education,

or domestic violence. The Orbán government, however, dominated all aspects of conservative ideology, which effectively undermined the potential for a critical conservative women's advocacy to emerge. After a decade and a half of supposedly Christian and conservative politics in Hungary, the nation's conservatives are still unable to present a unified and practical representation of women. Instead, there are three competing streams of Christian conservatism in Hungary. One is the emancipated conservative, the other is the religious conservative, and the third is the spiritual conservative.

The program of emancipated conservative women's politics differs from that of the statist feminism of the socialist era only in one critical respect: anti-communism. Aside from detesting Marxism, emancipated conservatives have no problem with the concept of womanhood promoted by state socialism. They idealize the "superwoman" who can perform exceptionally well in public and private life without needing structural support. On the issues of women's rights for self-determination, the right to abortion, or labor market participation, emancipated conservatives hold values very similar to those of the classic socialist leftists. They argue that women have a legitimate place in all spheres of life, including both their homes and paid employment. In their agenda, women should be able to fulfill the traditional caring role while building careers or, at least, contributing to the family budget.

Religious conservatives take a different position, especially on the issue of abortion. They are firmly in favor of restricting women's rights when it comes to reproduction. At the same time, they see female employment as a mostly unpleasant and unrewarding necessity for the family's sake. They consider unpaid care work as a duty assigned only to women. On the issues of prostitution and the trafficking of women, however, they share the view of human rights advocates. The casual political alliance between religious

conservatives and those emphasizing women's rights as human rights could be established via issues like home birth. Although on a basis different from the freedom of choice, the support for home birth stems from the conviction of the religious conservatives that reproductive responsibilities are solely assigned to women by nature and by God.

The ideologists of spiritual conservative women's policy, unlike neither the emancipated nor the religious conservative women, build on the idea that women are superior to men, especially spiritually. It originates from their ability to bear and produce new life. Spiritual conservatives often refer to alleged practices in the pagan Hungarian tradition, dating back to before the founding of the Christian Hungarian Kingdom at the turn of the first millennium. They argue that women and men, though assigned different tasks in life, are equal in society precisely because of their differences. In their argument, reproductive tasks originate from the biological differences between men and women. The Orbán government propaganda refers to this biological difference as the "feminine principle." Spiritual conservatives do not consider biological determinism as discrimination but rather as a unique advantage exclusively available for women. The far-right political parties represent the spiritual conservative standpoint of the *Mi Hazánk Mozgalom* (Our Homeland Movement) party.

Family-friendliness as a political product

Because it was too slow to gather momentum after the fall of state socialism, the conservative women's movement was re-invented and quickly institutionalized when Fidesz came to power in 2010. The governing party's support for women's political mobilization was not a product of mere sympathy but a cold-hearted act of political calculation. The ruling party has relied heavily on

the mobilizing power of conservative women ever since. It is no accident that Fidesz is marketed as the party for women. However, the lack of unity among conservative representations of women has created an essential tactical dilemma. How can one mobilize as many women as possible for a particular political aim, especially on election day, if that objective is to convince them that their only legitimate place is in the privacy of their homes rather than in the public sphere? Reinventing the concept of care was the perfect answer to this political dilemma. For centuries, teaching, rearing, and caring have traditionally been women's roles. It is no coincidence that, before World War II, during the period of state socialism, and finally in the Orbán era, these tasks have always been the key to constructing a sharp divide between public life and men's world, and private life and women's domain. This is how the slogan of being family-friendly became a best-selling political product to accomplish the seemingly impossible task of uniting the three different branches of conservative feminism in a way that leaves social hierarchies and the division of labor untouched.

For several reasons, the redefinition, modernization, and intellectual unification of Hungary's now fragmented Christian conservative women's politics would be a political necessity. First, the emancipatory politics of communism, such as the right to abortion or women's participation in the labor market, cannot be easily undone. Secondly, as a member of the European Union, the Hungarian government is obliged, even if only rhetorically, to advance gender equality. Thirdly, the dual-earner family model of the state-feminist period of communism cannot be replaced by the male-breadwinner model, as average wages in Hungary are among the lowest in the European Union. In most cases, a single-earner family inevitably lives in poverty. Facing financial reality comes at a steep price for both men and women.

The political problem remains that the Orbán regime has made a critical promise in its women's policy and has delivered virtually nothing. While birth rates rose temporarily in the early 2010s, the trend reversed after a few years and then worsened. Meanwhile, the number of women of childbearing age is steadily declining, and the total number of newborns in Hungary fell to an unprecedented low by the first half of 2024. This, together with the exodus of the young and educated and the low life expectancy of the people in the country compared to European standards (due to its nonfunctioning health-care system), has resulted in Hungary's population shrinking at one of the fastest rates in the European Union. The ineffectiveness of Orbán's family policy is particularly embarrassing for the government, given that many other state responsibilities have been sidelined and underfunded precisely to finance one of the most expensive family policies in the world. Ever since the 2022 parliamentary elections, Fidesz-KDNP has been experiencing one political crisis after another, which makes it possible for the opposition to point to the wasted opportunities and finances of the past years, which led to the grave policy failures of virtually every state-run welfare system, from health care and public education to child protection and public transportation.

Success in failure: A new modus vivendi

How can the Fidesz-KDNP government be so successful with voters if it can hardly show a single success in so many years? Fidesz-KDNP began building a state that differed in character and operation from previous ones. Political analysts are still debating how to describe this new way of operating. The most frequent terms describing Hungary in the past decade have been the "illiberal state," democratic authoritarianism," and "mafia

state.” One of the first theorists of modern liberal democracies, the French political scientist, historian, and aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote about 200 years ago that the idea of equality, as a kind of wild outgrowth, could eventually lead to the suppression of freedom itself. According to the French historian, in declining democracies, there may be parliamentary elections and formal constitutional institutions, but the institutional guarantees of liberty are missing. There are no checks and balances, and the state institutions that have been emptied and forced into an executive role can no longer limit the hegemonic government’s power or control its actions. The rule of law does not apply, and the state’s hegemonic leader dominates every aspect of public life. Although Tocqueville himself did not use the phrase “illiberal democracy,” historians and social scientists tend to attribute the first analysis of such a state system to him.

When describing Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, political analysts often use the term “illiberal,” and the Hungarian prime minister also stated in 2014 that he was building an “illiberal democracy.” In this book, however, when analyzing the processes of the Hungarian state from a gender perspective, we adopt an approach that differs from this descriptive attitude. Instead, we plan to investigate how the system is functioning. In this approach, we consider the Orbán-led government to be a “polypore state.” The concept of the polypore state highlights the system’s unique characteristics and tries to capture the specificity of its *modus operandi*. We believe that the way it functions is the most critical innovation of Orbán’s state, not its agenda or ideology, which is the main reason the government claims success.

Polypore is a species of fungus that grows mainly on tree trunks. Its sole purpose is to keep itself alive. To do so, it sucks whatever it needs to sustain itself from the tree’s trunk and leaves the tree alive only as a resource. The polypore state functions similarly, so

its aim falls far short of the desire to make all its citizens prosper and feel secure. Instead, it concentrates most of its resources on a narrow group of chosen ones while feeding on the whole body of the nation it ignores.

The polypore state has three means to sustain itself. These methods are essential when assessing gender politics, which often remains under the radar of traditional political analyses. A polypore state operates by creating its parallel institutions, especially in the civil society sector. Such pseudo-civil society organizations look like traditional non-governmental organizations (NGOs); they are officially registered as NGOs but are funded by the government with taxpayer money. The existence of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), is a significant development in the representation of human rights, including women's rights. GONGOs seem to have the same objectives as grassroots organizations, claim to be utterly independent of the government, and purport to act as watchdogs. In the case of women's rights, for example, GONGOs, as well as NGOs, might focus on the same issues, such as work-life balance, the integration of mothers into the labor market, building the needed infrastructure for mothers with young children, and supporting single or abused mothers. When in action, however, GONGOs tend to address these issues in ways and within an ideological framework that serve the goals of the polypore state. The deal behind this is quite clear: the financial support, meaning the public funding GONGOs enjoy, is a condition of their unquestionable loyalty to the government. They help women, though, in most cases, only a very narrow, select group. However, the real purpose of this deal is clear to all parties. These organizations support the state that provides these funds unconditionally and publicly. Meanwhile, because of a parallel GONGO scene, the Hungarian government can report to the European Union and UN institu-

tions, such as CEDAW, about a flourishing civil society sector fighting inequalities. However, these organizations drain grassroots advocacy groups' limited financial resources, visibility, and often expertise.

Another essential characteristic of the polypore state is its familialism. Instead of women's or family policy, it has a familial policy, meaning that the Hungarian state intends to help only some women in their fight for equality or only some families on their way to prosperity. There is a narrowly selected group of couples and families that the polypore state considers worthy of its support. These are married heterosexual couples with children, almost exclusively (upper-)middle-class families. The terminology of the struggle for women's equality can also occasionally loom behind the familial approach to gender equality. Still, according to the Hungarian government's mainstream rhetoric, a woman can only be identified as the subject of any policy regarding her rights or benefits if she is united with a man.

Government measures, for example, such as the one that allows women with young children to work while receiving a childcare allowance, are widely popular. When looking more closely at reality, however, another tricky piece of reality pops out from behind. Women almost exclusively request childcare benefits at the time of childbirth. There has been a significant increase in the number of fathers who take over the care of their children when they are around one year old, when it becomes possible for the caretaker to also have a job without losing the childcare benefit. In many cases, it means the parents are trying to take on a more equal share of child-rearing. Although when we analyze this phenomenon in detail, as we will do in the upcoming chapters, it appears that there are tens of thousands of cases in which reality lies relatively far from the statistics (and from the reports the Hungarian government submits to the CEDAW Committee).

It is suspected that, in many cases, fathers working full-time sign up to be their children's primary caretakers only on official request forms. Why does this make sense? Because monthly childcare allowances are based on income, the higher the income, the more money the parent is entitled to. As a unit, the family can earn more income at the end of the month if the father works full-time and receives a childcare allowance, as permitted by law. The mother, however, does not return to the labor market but continues to care for the child as if nothing had happened. She will, however, lose all social coverage, including workplace protection, which means her employer may fire her. Although the lack of transparent statistical data makes it impossible to determine what percentage of affected families follow this practice, more and more social scientists are reporting that this is the case. Family taxation is also accepted in Hungary, regardless of the literature, proving it to be economically very disadvantageous for women, as it leads to old-age poverty. Yet, more than a million Hungarian women vote for a party promoting gender politics that is against their long-term economic interests. In our volume, we seek to understand this seemingly contradictory phenomenon with illustrative examples from the Orbán era and beyond.

The third important characteristic that sustains the polypore state is keeping security at the center of public policy discourse. At the rhetorical level, every government action and every policy decision is presented as a security issue for the Hungarian government. This practice from 2010 onwards was only made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The securitization of policymaking has enabled the vigilant and defensive government to overcome what it labels threats while hiding the absolute chaos, corruption, and redistribution of wealth to loyal oligarchs in plain sight. While there was no identifiable outside enemy to fear, the Hungarian government created sever-

al: it identified migrants, George Soros, rainbow families, gender studies, Brussels, left-wing ideologies, and former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány as threats against the nation. That is the reason why grassroots NGOs fighting for women's rights have become a threat to the so-called traditional family model. Women's rights organizations were one of the "enemies of the state." Despite their best efforts, they were unable to successfully challenge the government's simple and easily remembered slogan that was displayed on billboards paid for by taxpayers' money in the most remote corners of the country: "No Gender."

**Gender is what everyone rejects,
but no one understands**

The gender war is far from being confined to Hungary; a whole range of illiberal political actors around the world is waging it. What is rather extraordinary in Orbán's Hungary is that, as part of this "war on gender," such extreme and effective measures could be implemented in an EU member state without any serious consequences, such as deleting accredited gender studies programs in higher education. Issued directly by the government through a decree, this act violates academic freedom, a key principle of university education and research. Academic freedom was not the only victim of this "war on gender" in Hungary. This political game led to limiting the rights for adoption exclusively to heterosexual married couples, and that is seriously violating the fundamental interests of children in state care. The "war on gender" is a political strategy that has little to do with centuries of anti-feminism, with the fight against emancipation, or even with the conservative response to the political successes of the movements of 1968. It is aimed at creating a new world order: the "war on gender" is a nationalist, neo-conservative response to the crisis of the neoliberal global order, offering a viable and livable alternative to many, including the women voters of Fidesz.

Since the fight against gender is a central element of government communication in Hungary, it is essential to clarify what gender means for the government and its propagandists and researchers who observe and analyze social processes. The term “gender” has four parallel meanings that have developed over the past decades. First, it refers to the biological sex someone is born with. Secondly, in the unique language of policymaking, the term “gender” is used as a more elegant way to refer to women whenever policy addresses questions such as the numbers and roles of women in science, politics, and the economy. The second is the one used in policy language and is the more elegant term for women, referring to the number of women in politics and related fields. The third definition is that societies create, maintain, and enforce power structures based on gender, which determine social opportunities. Among other aspects, these power structures are also based on gender, and that is why the Istanbul Convention uses the term “gender” as “socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.” The fourth meaning of gender is an individual’s own identity. This may overlap with biological sex, but can also be partially or entirely different from it. This last layer of meaning, gender identity, is the one that the Hungarian government seems to be clinging to by declaring “no gender.” This, however, only creates a new set of enemies: people whose gender orientation or identity differs completely or partially from the norm. It normalizes political mudslinging and makes voters complicit. This battle, however, has another significant effect: it creates a battlefield where, as collateral damage, half of the population, and even more paradoxically, half the electorate, namely women, are let down. So far, this has had no political consequences.

The notion of gender that the Orbán government fights against in science, in social discourse, in the propaganda press, and even

on billboards along motorways is not only an overly complex concept that needs explanation, but can also function as a symbolic glue in the global illiberal discourse. It can draw together groups that would otherwise have little in common, let alone belong to a single political camp. The fight against this common enemy-gender-presents them with a world worth living in. For the Russian Orthodox Church, the Polish Catholic Church, the Hungarian historical churches, the football ultras, the illiberal politicians, and their most committed voters, a common emotional, linguistic, and political base has been created on the billboards of rural Hungary: “No Gender.” Except that, in this sense, gender is not something that exists. Orbán’s war on gender is a proxy concept used for political purposes, and the slogan that unites the followers is only a denial of its non-existent content. Part of the problem is that the political and ideological opponents of the illiberal regimes do not seem to understand that they have been lured into a trap from which they cannot escape. As far as the collateral damage goes, as we shall see in this book, the hate campaign against gender left a void where no practical linguistic and intellectual toolkit remained for the analysis and description of the inequalities between men and women. While Hungary’s leader once claimed he had the luxury of not having to deal with women’s affairs, in light of a new political force emerging in Hungary, Viktor Orbán was forced to reconsider. At the very end of 2024, the Orbán government embraced an action plan designed to improve equality between men and women. Writing reports, however, will not be enough to accomplish political change. Determination for real political change regarding women’s affairs, however, is yet to come.

CHAPTER 1

Meet the meat market

[T]he term “discrimination against women” shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women.

– CEDAW, Article 1

Using examples from advertising and the regulation of nightlife, we show how women’s bodies can be portrayed as pieces of meat in a European Union member state.

“We deliver your raw material every day for free!” This phrase, used on the posters stuck to the sides of its delivery vans by a Hungarian company called Chef Market, could hardly be considered particularly catchy. However, the phrase was right on the money for a delivery company supplying restaurants with fresh products such as meat, vegetables, and dairy. The secret behind the quick success of the company’s marketing strategy, however, was not the phrase but the photo next to the slogan. On the side of the vans, there were life-size photographs featuring young women posing erotically, shoving off their breasts and buttocks. The models were almost entirely naked; their intimate body parts

were covered only by thinly sliced meat, bacon, and ham. On the posters, a telephone number and a simple message said: “Meat products – The Chef’s choice.” Vans driving around the streets of Budapest with advertisements like this could have been, and probably were, completely acceptable in the 1980s and 1990s, not only in Hungary, but most places in the Western world. However, those times were over by the time Chef Market was founded in 2013. Hungary had been a member of the European Union since 2004, which expected member states to fight against discrimination. Everyday sexism was and still is present in many aspects of life, but by the mid-2010s, it was not a common practice to sell prosciutto with naked female bodies. Chef Market, on the other hand, was thriving, and its public visibility grew fast, presumably not unrelated to its questionable advertising techniques. It is no wonder that the enterprise seeking the most possible profits had been drawing a parallel without hesitation for years between female bodies placed in erotic poses and the ham and steak needed for supper.

The example of Chef Market could have been an exception in Fidesz-KDNP-led Hungary, mainly because, at the time, the governing politicians never missed a chance to stage a publicity stunt to declare themselves Christian and conservative. Nevertheless, another public scandal shed light on the everyday practice of gender discrimination. At the same time that the company using women’s bodies to advertise ham and salami was launched in 2013, a student activist, Szilárd Teczár, declared war on a nightclub in Budapest based on its discriminatory practice. He filed a complaint with the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights because he could only enter the Dobox venue by buying a ticket. What he found outrageous was not paying for a ticket, but the common practice in Budapest at the time: only men had to pay; women, on the other hand, could enter the same venues for free.

Teczár filed a complaint alleging that this practice of the nightclubs violated Article XV of the Fundamental Law, which states that no one shall suffer any disadvantage or benefit solely based on their sex. Although in public discourse, the fact that women, unlike men, were allowed to have fun for free was interpreted by many as positive discrimination, the activist thought the practice instead “sends the message that men have to pay to get access to the women lured in by the nightclub. Put bluntly, it is a disguised form of solicitation for prostitution, where men pay the nightclub for the presence of women.” But what does this have to do with posters offering meat products stacked on naked women? Although Chef Market did not include a nude woman with the food when delivering orders, the ads made a similar association: the female body is just one in a line of products that can be purchased anytime.

Who is your target of discrimination now?

Although no research on gender discrimination in Hungary funded by public money was conducted in the first half of the 2010s, data from international institutions can offer some insight into the issue. According to 2009 Eurobarometer data, the largest pan-European opinion polling institute, gender equality in Hungary was far from established even before the Orbán regime settled in. More than half of the Hungarians surveyed in the European poll identified gender-based discrimination as the most significant and widespread form of discrimination. The Viktor Orbán-led Fidesz-KDNP coalition, elected in 2010 with a constitutional majority, was in no hurry to change citizens’ attitudes on this. According to data published every two years by the European Institute for Gender

Equality (EIGE), the European Union's agency monitoring equal opportunities, during the era of the System of National Cooperation, or NER, introduced by Orbán, there has been virtually no improvement in the country's Gender Equality Index. This measure uses a single score on a 100-point scale to indicate how women and men participate across different fields of society. A score of 100 means that women and men enjoy full equality, with neither gender being disadvantaged in any area of life. A score of 1, on the other hand, means that women are entirely marginalized compared to men in all spheres of life. In the countries with a performance closest to the EU average, such as Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Italy, this indicator is around 70, while in the best-performing countries, such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, it is around 80, meaning that women suffer structural disadvantages in one or more areas of life even in the societies that are most livable for them. Hungary's index of just 54 points, significantly below the EU average, ranks the country among the bottom three in the European Union since the measure was introduced in 2013.

This may explain the data collected by the German left-wing Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, FES), which conducted a focus group survey in Hungary in 2018. Through the survey, FES explored Hungarians' sensitivity to the disadvantages women face. Respondents identified that women with young children, women with chronically ill children, women who raise their children alone, women who care for elderly family members, and women who have been abused are all groups being less supported than would be desirable or than other groups in society. The study also found that the women in these groups lacked social solidarity and institutional support.

With the Eurobarometer data revealing severe gender discrimination in Hungary in 2009, it is difficult to argue that the lack of solidarity towards women experiencing difficulties in their daily lives was a fault of the Orbán regime. However, what stands out is that, during the 2023 UN CEDAW Committee hearing, the Fidesz-KDNP delegation took the position that the government “does not consider the issue of women’s equality to be a problem in its own right.” This very much echoes the statement of the prime minister, who stated in 2017 that he does not wish to deal with women’s affairs. This is not to say that gender discrimination is not addressed at all in Hungary. Still, according to its delegates’ statement, the government understands women’s rights exclusively in the context of the family. This at least partially explains the painfully low Hungarian Gender Equality Index frequently reported by EIGE.

Given that Hungary has been, for almost half a century, committed to the UN’s international CEDAW Convention, which was specifically designed to ensure that the governments of the signatory member states address women’s equality as a specific problem to be solved, the committee, accordingly, has warned the Hungarian government of its duty to fulfill its commitments. Among other measures, it called for immediate actions, resulting in anti-discrimination legislation that consistently and explicitly enforces women’s and girls’ rights in all segments of society. The expected outcome is questionable, especially since the Hungarian government was already urged by the same body, CEDAW, to implement the same provision in 2013. The only significant change since the 2013 hearing has been that, in 2023, Fidesz-KDNP openly declared that women’s issues are not considered a separate matter for policymaking. This stance of the Orbán government has spread beyond Hungary’s borders through generous public funding.

Men being discriminated against is a powerful buzzword

In any case, Chef Market's advertisements and the admission practices of Budapest nightclubs were the subject of several court hearings

in Hungary in the 2010s. The Equal Treatment Authority filed a complaint against Chef Market in 2017, at the initiative of a citizen. The authority, which has since been abolished, had the mandate in Hungary to protect various social groups, including women, from discrimination. According to the authority,

By displaying the almost naked female body in a ring of various vegetable and meat products and other goods, the female body is directly associated with these goods, which can potentially lead to the female body being seen as a commodity. The fact that the image on the side of the vehicle shows the female figure in a life-size, semi-recumbent position may create the impression that the vehicle is transporting the woman, which is also likely to invoke or reinforce the association of the female body as a transported commodity.

Despite the authority's observations, the court of first instance found nothing objectionable in Chef Market's advertisements and dismissed the case. Although the Equal Treatment Authority appealed, the case was dropped again, as the Budapest Court of Appeal accepted the defense counsel's argument that advertising is a genre that necessarily employs "quickly understandable" stereotypes. Although the lawsuit failed, the negative press coverage prompted Chef Market to replace the images of women on its vans in the best interests of its business.

While the advertisements depicting women in questionable contexts did not meet the threshold for Hungarian law enforcement, the activist who filed a complaint against Budapest nightclubs' practices brought his case to a successful conclusion. On

the surface, Teczár's complaint was not about improving women's status in Hungarian society; he primarily objected to men being discriminated against in nightclubs. Along with this, his complaint also argued that charging only men at the venues negatively affected perceptions of women. In his own newspaper articles, he explained in detail why he framed his complaint as discrimination against men rather than against women. He argued that "[t] he only recourse for girls would be to complain about a humiliating atmosphere, but experience has shown that such complaints are less likely to be accepted by the Equal Treatment Authority than complaints of direct discrimination."

He was right: in a matter of months, with lightning speed by Hungarian standards, the authority ruled that the practice was discriminatory. However, the case did not end there: the club in question, after losing cases against the complainant in the Administrative Court of Budapest and the Labor Court, appealed to the Constitutional Court in 2016, citing the right to conduct business as a fundamental right. After losing there as well, the Constitutional Court ordered all entertainment venues in Hungary to end discriminatory entry practices based on visitors' gender. Most nightclubs solved the problem by abolishing the entrance fee altogether.

Hungarian society is not up to coping with gender inequality

Although he won, Teczár's war on Budapest's nightclubs made him a public outcast for months. He was attacked, for example, for being the one

who was, in fact, covertly turning all women into prostitutes by his very complaint. According to his critics, Teczár questioned women's free will, degrading both women whom he portrayed as needing protection and men whom he allegedly described as po-

tential predators. Some commentators argued that the decision in Teczár's favor was an acknowledgment that women cannot protect themselves. It reinforced the social stereotype that women are incapable of making responsible choices, either when having fun or in any other areas of life. Nationally known celebrity hosts of one of Hungary's most popular morning radio shows were commenting on Teczár's appearance, trying to discredit the activist's anti-discrimination work with homophobic remarks about his perceived sexual orientation.

After many years, it is clear that Teczár's victory was, at best, a half-success. He achieved the abolition of nightclub entrance fees. Still, the idea that nightclubs should cater to men seeking female companionship or casual partners to generate more revenue remained unchanged. It is no coincidence that Budapest's nightlife district became a favorite spot for Western European stag parties. Aside from offering a unique atmosphere and varied nightlife in historic Budapest at a significantly lower price than most major Western European cities, many clubs also attract a crowd with drink promotions designed primarily to make women feel more liberated and, as a side effect, more vulnerable. At the very moment of writing this book, for example, one of Budapest's most popular nightclubs, Füge udvar (Fige Court), is promoting its ladies' nights, when women either get a couple of free drinks or get drinks for half price all night under the slogan "Girls are in the spotlight while the boys take over the hunting ground."

This practice, which can be considered a textbook case of discrimination against men on the one hand and as negatively affecting women on the other, is not unique to Hungary. The marketing trick of offering free drinks to women imported from the United States has now been banned in several US states, including California, Maryland, and Wisconsin, while in others, such as Illinois, Minnesota, and Washington, it has been ruled illegal by the

courts. Perceptions of gender-specific access or sale of beverages vary widely in Europe as well. Nightlife practice is virtually unknown in the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and Germany, whereas in Croatia and Greece it is still widespread. There are also countries where it is forbidden, yet it remains popular. Even though the Equality Act of 2010 explicitly banned this marketing strategy in the UK, some clubs still promote so-called ladies' nights.

Although politicians are not very eager to regulate nightlife in Hungary, the youth organization of Fidesz, Fidelitas, made its stance clear on the issue. They honored Teczár's action with a so-called "Buzgómócsing Award." In Hungarian, the pejorative term *buzgómócsing* describes people who invest a great deal of energy in irrelevant topics and activities that interest no one or only a few. The ruling party's youth organization's reaction might not reflect any direct government involvement. It still shows, however, that the institutions listed in the government's reports to the CEDAW Committee, which are supposed to eliminate gender discrimination, may do very little in practice. At the very least, the fact that these values are not respected, even on a rhetorical level, within the party's youth organizations supports this assumption.

The public prosecutor, the Advertising and Media Authority, which regulates advertisements, and the courts did not find that Chef Market's posters depicting women as goods were particularly harmful to society or in breach of the media law. Nevertheless, the company's practices have changed, and, albeit slowly, a social discourse has also developed around its incriminating advertising. The case has sparked a long, extensive public debate due to the relentless work of activists and journalists. The Chef Market posters were commented on by both liberal and conservative journalists, for example, a publicist of *Heti Válasz*, a conservative weekly newspaper founded at the initiative of Fidesz's top management during the first Orbán government between 1998 and 2002. Ac-

According to this article, the posters sparked widespread outrage, even in conservative circles. This seems somewhat contradicted by the fact that while millions of citizens with conservative values vote for Fidesz, which declares itself both conservative and Christian, the public petition against the Chef Market advertisement was signed by only 572 responsible citizens in 2014. The author of the article, on the other hand, had touched a nerve – millions of left-wing and liberal voters had remained silent as well. They were apparently indifferent to Chef Market’s practice of advertising ham with images of women since they had not protested en masse. The petition calling for action against the posters was initiated by activists whom the journalist of *Heti Válasz* identified, somewhat pejoratively, as “feminists.” In the public discussion forum linked to the petition against the advertising practice of Chef Market, it was the protesting NGOs that were attacked, not the company that advertised meat products with naked women.

Of course, it would be unjust to conclude that neither conservative nor liberal voters were bothered by the posters objectifying women. Likely, collecting signatures is not a particularly effective method of resistance in an illiberal regime that uses legal and extrajudicial means to silence activists. It may also indicate a general lack of solidarity in Hungarian society, which is by no means limited to the objectification of women. Finally, it may also show that, while no real change is expected from the protest, masses of voters may fear that initiating and signing the petition would only make it easier for pro-government pollsters to monitor every move of citizens. They might fear that such monitoring could have consequences. Indeed, people who voice their opinions publicly may, with or without justification, fear retaliation at work and even an unexpected investigation by tax authorities. The power factory of Orbán’s has an apparatus of dozens of specialized institutions that gather data on the preferences of Hungarian citizens, and this has significantly changed the traditional tools of political battle.

**Protests may take place,
but they happen without social
support**

Following the 2013 hearing, the CEDAW Committee recommended that the Hungarian government develop a separate institutional framework within the government infrastructure to identify and address inequalities between women and men, rather than lumping social injustices together. Although both the Chef Market and the Budapest nightclub incidents occurred later, they could not have been handled by the specific institutional framework proposed by the CEDAW Committee, as such specialized forums did not exist. Hungary has had no institutions to monitor social inequalities between women and men ever since. While successive Orbán governments have reorganized the government structure numerous times, the institutions responsible for monitoring and addressing gender inequalities recommended by CEDAW have not been established. Viktor Orbán's government abolished the Inter-Ministerial Coordination Council, set up by the previous left-liberal government, to organize consultations among the government, experts, and NGOs to eliminate gender inequalities. In 2021, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition finally integrated the Equal Treatment Authority, established in 2004 by the left-liberal alliance, into the Office of the Fundamental Rights Commissioner. According to the independent civil rights organization TASZ (Hungarian Civic Liberties Union), the direct consequence of this action is that it has become significantly more difficult to enforce any infringement in Hungary than it was before 2021. This reorganization has, therefore, not only made it more troublesome to take legal action against gender discrimination but also made all other social groups more vulnerable. Human rights activists argue that the newly appointed Commissioner for Fundamental Rights is not independent and plays a role in the government structure that is entirely different from that of an authority. The establish-

ment of a network of equal opportunity commissioners in rural Hungary was one of the conditions for Hungary's accession to the EU in 2004. According to TASZ, its abolition would severely restrict the rights of those living outside Budapest to launch any complaints. A significant portion of the previously filed cases, the investigations conducted, and the remedies granted have also been made inaccessible, further reducing the likelihood of new complaints.

The Hungarian government dismantled women's representation long before the Equal Treatment Authority was degraded. The official body representing women's rights within the governmental structure was first downgraded from a ministry to a state secretariat, then to a mere department, and finally to a departmental subdivision within one of the ministries. This process of hijacking and despecification of government mechanisms protecting women went quickly. The complete dismantling of the governmental, institutional system for the protection of equality between women and men has been the subject of protests by civil society organizations in Hungary. A group of Hungarian grassroots NGOs, the Civil Coalition (Civilizáció Koalíció), protested the abolition of the Equal Treatment Authority in an open letter. The petition was signed by 18 organizations, including the women's advocacy groups that have been the most important actors in the Hungarian women's movement. Although existing laws enable women to take individual legal action against perceived discrimination, there is no government support or intention to follow up on the success of such cases. Structural disadvantages women face are no longer mentioned in game-changing governmental policies. Although the requirements for equal treatment are part of the Equal Opportunities Act and the Labor Code, to mention but a few pieces of legislation, the laws – albeit in their written forms

being in line with EU requirements – do not effectively protect the interests of ordinary citizens. This is due to a complete lack of social awareness, a low likelihood of compliance with the law, and unequal treatment in the courts. It is theoretically possible that citizens, maybe even women with very high social status and the necessary financial resources, can defend their rights and interests independently. However, it would still take extremely lengthy and pricey legal proceedings. No wonder that even resourceful, well-placed citizens of high social status avoid getting into a legal battle against a state with virtually unlimited economic power. They fear retaliation and the loss of their wealth for an excellent reason.

Women victims of Hungarian macho culture have occasionally tried to take up the fight with the help of publicity. In the wake of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein’s sexual abuse scandal in 2017, a well-known Hungarian theater director, László Márton, was reported to have used his fame and professional power to make unwanted and violent advances on several very young women, in their late teens or early twenties, who aspired to build a career in theater. Although the French state had previously honored Weinstein, President Emmanuel Macron moved to withdraw the honors following the widespread sexual misconduct allegations against Weinstein. (He was eventually sentenced to prison in the United States.) Such symbolic action was not even considered against Marton, who was also heavily decorated by the Hungarian state with high awards. Not only did he not set foot in prison, but the director of a rural town theater invited him to join his community and continue his work there. In an interview, this rural theater director, who has strong ties to the government, stated that “we have an increased responsibility to find each other, to reach out and lift those who the world of the internet has dragged down.” He added that his decision to help Marton (against whom dozens of women had made accusations) was supported by the

Fidesz-run city council and the sponsors of his theater – in other words, the state itself.

Allegations against Marton were regularly discussed in Hungarian newspapers as an everyday reality of the entertainment industry. In the very same year the accusations against Marton surfaced, a mayor of a rural municipality, a member of Fidesz, faced criminal court for indecent exposure and sexually assaulting an employee. The village registrar, a single mother whose husband had died recently, had reported the mayor for assaulting her, claiming in an interview that her superior had almost raped her. Although the registrar's accusations were backed up by several female colleagues in the office, and the mayor was found guilty in court, this politician – who sexually harassed his subordinate – nevertheless ran for office again in 2024 with the support of Fidesz. The only reason he is no longer in office is that one of the challengers actually won the election. And when the Fidesz mayor was found guilty of the criminal charges, he was ordered by the court to pay a fine of only 300,000 forints (750 euros), which is hardly a discouraging punishment. The registrar who had denounced him told journalists that she had seen no point in quitting and seeking a new job during the trial or even after the court ruled in her favor. As she said, the politician, who was well-connected in the small rural town, practically had control over all the possible jobs she could apply for. She feared becoming unemployed and she still had underage children to care for.

The phenomenon of men harassing women without suffering consequences is not confined to rural Hungary. Not a single influential leader, but the whole management team of a company, was accused of maltreatment in the summer of 2024 by dozens of female employees. The Hungarian branch of a large German industrial player, ThyssenKrupp Hungary, faced thorough internal investigations for allowing a hostile work environment. Af-

ter an unsuccessful complaint that resulted in no change, one of the company's employees openly shared her experience on an online forum. Dozens of other women commented on her post, all reporting similar incidents they experienced at the Hungarian branch of the German company. In response to the allegations, which went viral, ThyssenKrupp launched an internal investigation. The company's human resources specialists from Germany were also involved. After three months with no action from the company's headquarters in Budapest, the engineer who had been the source of the leaks contacted a journalist with an independent press outlet. She told the reporter that it was commonplace for women working at the German company's Hungarian branch to be sexually harassed by managers making derogatory remarks. According to the employee, who complained first to the company's Hungarian office and then to the headquarters in Germany, there are quite a few men in the Budapest office who did not engage in this type of behavior, but the "men who do not go along with the macho culture and try to protect women are laughed at or called names. But those who like the behavior say it's cool. It's as if they are still in college," she says. According to the engineer who spoke to the journalists, in recent years women in her position have dealt with the problem themselves by resigning and leaving the company. She stated in the interview that she was no longer afraid of retaliation at work, either, because, having failed to find an alternative, she was finally ready to find another job.

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Chapter 1

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