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Women and Nationalism in Hungary: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Nationalism and Reproductive Rights in Hungary

Shannon Short

In April of 2011, Fidesz, the ruling party in Hungary, ushered a new Constitution through Parliament.[i] Fidesz' leader and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán proudly heralded it as the culmination of a revolution "fought not with swords and blood, but with the heart and faith."[ii] The 2011 Constitution came amid a surge in nationalistic fervor that portrayed Hungary as a Christian nation and made assertions of conservative, nationalistic ideals.[iii] Accompanying this surge in nationalism was a corresponding restriction of the traditional roles and rights of women in Hungary up to that point. As Prime Minister Orbán and his party, Fidesz, touted nationalistic sentiments across the country, the government seized control over women's reproductive health to secure an enduring Hungarian identity through the birth of babies within their preferred national identity.

Defining Nationalism

As noted by philosopher Ernest Gellner, nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy that invents nations where they do not exist through the imposition of a high culture on local or low-level cultures.[iv] Commenting on Gellner's definition of nationalism, political scientist Benedict Anderson goes on to contend that Gellner's definition of nationalism conflates invention to falsity. Conversely, Anderson proposes that nations are "imagined communities" with systems of cultural representation where people imagine shared experiences that form their identification with extended communities.[v] Nations then rely on the institutionalization and performance of differentiation between communities and people. For nationalism to take hold, distinct gender roles must be embraced. This is how the next generation of nationalists will be raised to perpetrate the nationalist agenda. As such, nationalism relies on gendered constructions and institutionalized differences in gender, thus making nationalism reliant on patriarchy.[vi]

Etymologically, nationalism boils down to the elevation of one's national identity above its more esoteric characteristics, emphasizing a heterogeneous society and marginalizing, or excluding those who are aligned to personal identities. This is inherently problematic for those who minimally participate in political processes or are further removed from mainstream socioeconomic categories. Therefore, nationalism is hazardous to those whose identity is perceived to be in conflict with the image of a homogeneous national identity.[vii] This identity is often crafted universally, as if men and women experience nationalism identically, and therefore is often operationalized under the traditional default setting of being a man.[viii] Like men, women may be energized by nationalistic fervor, but it is often the case in nationalism that women are reduced to mere symbols of the state: the state and women must both be pure, protected, and willing to reproduce.[ix] This signifies that the creation of the sought-after homogeneous national identity is really a homogenous national *male* identity, whereby the mandated differentiation in society means women remain isolated from, and very often under the control, of men.

Women in Nationalism

Nationalism necessitates the birth of children who fit into such a homogeneous national identity. Thus, women in countries experiencing a rise in nationalism also often experience a call to fulfill their duty to the state by bearing children who fit in the preferred nationality.[x] Nationalistic countries may then employ restrictions in contraceptive knowledge and techniques, denial of abortion, and material rewards for bearing children.[xi] In such a setting, abortion may even be decried as treasonous.[xii] This can be seen through the statements of Croatian President Franjo Tudman, who referred to women who have abortions as "mortal enemies of the nation,"

further stating that abortion is a "national catastrophe" and that any woman who has not birthed at least four children has not "fulfilled their unique, sacred duty."[xiii]

For women who do not fit into the prescribed national identity, a surge in nationalism may be met with draconian solutions. In Nazi Germany, for example, Jewish women were subject to forced sterilization, while Aryan women who sought abortions were subject to harsh punishment, including the death penalty.[xiv] The stark contrast between the way pregnancy was treated for the two groups of women was indicative of an even more heinous distinction made at the state level of "worthy" and "unworthy" life, which led to enforced, selective breeding by the state.[xv] A similar trend can be seen in more recent years in Italy, where the government has accused migrant women of being too fertile.[xvi] The birth of migrant babies became such a "problem" in Italy that the Ministry for Policies on the Family began offering "baby bonuses" to Italian women as an incentive to birth Italian babies and counteract the influx of migrant baby births.[xvii] In a similar vein, Turkish President Erdoğan has advocated for Turkish women to have at least three babies and has referenced the Kurdish minority "terrorist group in Turkey" as having "at least ten to fifteen children" as the source of this push.[xviii] All of these examples show how control over a woman's reproductive system has been hijacked by nationalist states trying to purify their country through a baby boom of the preferred race.

Hungarian Nationalism

For Hungary, the seeds of a non-democratic regime have been festering for centuries. Authoritarian domination by outside powers has been a reasonably consistent condition for Hungary, dating back to the Mongols in the thirteenth century and ending only in 1990 with the retraction of the Soviet Union's forces.[xix] This perpetual control by outside powers cultivated a

legacy of muzzled civic participation, eliminating an important precondition for democracy and making the country ripe for a takeover by an illiberal, nationalistic government.[xx] Prime Minister Orbán first seized this opportunity when he came to power in 1998.[xxi] Following a brief hiatus from the office, Orbán's re-election in 2010 resulted in him and his party, Fidesz, advocating for constitutional reforms to consolidate control over the country's independent institutions such as journalists, universities, and non-governmental organizations."[xxii] He is an open advocate of illiberal democracy, and because of the policies he has enacted since taking office, Hungary has become the first and only member of the European Union to be considered partly free by Freedom House.[xxiii] His goal is to create an illiberal Hungarian state that rests on "national foundations," citing examples of China, Russia, and Turkey as inspiration.[xxiv]

Orbán's re-election campaigns have focused , at length, on the narrative that Christian Europe is "under invasion" by migrants and that countries who do not stop immigration "will be lost."[xxv] In 2016, Orbán referred to migrants as "poison" and said that his country did not want nor need "a single migrant."[xxvi] His campaigns have openly advocated against migration as a human right, and he's frequently criticized the European Union for implementing a refugee quota. In 2018, he stated that "Africa wants to kick down our door, and Brussels is not defending us."[xxvii] In a 2018 re-election speech, he recalled how Hungary had ejected the Ottomans, Habsburgs, and Soviets and how they would likewise eject the "Uncle Georges," in a reference to George Soros, who is of Hungarian Jewish descent and remains a vocal proponent of civil participation in the country.[xxviii] Through such comments, Orbán has established a political persona based on the premise that Hungarians "do not want a multicultural society" and that "it is very important to preserve ethnic homogeneity."[xxix]

Prime Minister Orbán has also adopted family-centric rhetoric, claiming that the family "is the foundation of the nation" and that it "must be protected."[xxx] This has become such a defining characteristic of Prime Minister Orbán's posture that a sign at the Budapest airport welcomes new arrivals to a "family-friendly Hungary."[xxxi] In line with this position, several changes have ensued, aimed at keeping men and women in their traditional, familial roles. For example, the public school curriculum features textbooks that perpetuate a wide swath of gender stereotypes, positioning women as only wives or mothers and often implying that women are generally less intelligent than men.[xxxii] This cultural typecasting is reflected among the Hungarian population, 77% of whom feel that women should bear most, if not all, of the immediate post-birth childcare, while men go to work outside of the home.[xxxiii] Continuing with this trend, nearly 70% of Hungarians believe that a child will suffer if their mother works.[xxxiv] This suggests that the procedural differentiation inherent within nationalism is designed to create an environment in which women who aim to have jobs instead of, or in addition to, being mothers are seen as deviant, thus discouraging women from aspiring to be anything but reproductive agents.

These gendered stereotypes are reflected through the words and actions of the Fidesz party. For example, a commercial starring senior government minister, Katalin Novák, encouraged Hungarian women to make peace with the fact that they will never make as much as their male counterparts, and advised Hungarian women to not try and compete with men and instead try to follow different baking recipes.[xxxv] Minister Novák goes on to suggest that the only way for Hungarian women to be successful is to have children and that they should "know their place."[xxxvi] She concludes by saying, "Let's not give up our privileges in a misunderstood emancipation struggle… dare to say yes to the child."[xxxvii] While this is a flagrant display of anti-

feminist, nationalistic propaganda, Novák was not the only Fidesz member to suggest such blatantly sexist behaviors. Fidesz Representative Varga stated in a debate session regarding domestic violence that women should go back to having "two or three or rather four or five" children so that men will value women more, leading to a decrease in domestic violence.[xxxviii] He concluded by stating that if people want to be Hungarian in fifty or sixty years, then every woman must have at least two or three children, reducing the role of women in Hungary to simply baby-making machines and placing the endurance of Hungary as contingent on women birthing Hungarian babies.[xxxix]Another famous Hungarian political figure, Edda Budaházy, stated in a publicized commercial that "without giving birth to at least two children, you are also the cause of Hungary's destruction," concluding with an urging to women to not "be feminists, but mothers."[xl]

While this rhetoric and its congruent beliefs are alarming in their glaring distaste of women who behave outside of their assigned gender norms, it is also inherently nationalistic. Reducing the Hungarian woman solely to a mother who produces children keeps the patriarchy intact and preserves the patriarchy through the perpetuation of male privilege and female oppression.[xli] While the movement for Hungarian-born babies is evident in the comments made by Fidesz senior members, it has also been operationalized in the policies of Viktor Orbán's tenure. Following an all-time low birth rate of only 1.23 children per woman in 2011, he addressed the issue by claiming that "the west wants as many migrants to enter as there are missing children" and that in his Hungary, they have a "different way of thinking…instead of just numbers, we want Hungarian children…migration for us is surrender."[xlii] In line with his goal of increasing the Hungarian birthrate, Orbán has devoted five percent of Hungary's annual GDP to family-planning measures.[xliii] With this money, he has nationalized in-vitro fertilization

clinics, offering free treatment to all heteronormative Hungarian women under the age of forty.[xliv,xlv] In addition to this, the government has implemented the Family Housing Allowance Program (*családi otthonteremtési kedvezmény,* or CSOK in Hungarian), which offers newly married couples loans of up to the equivalent of $36,000 US dollars to buy a home.[xlvi] If the couple has three children within a preset time frame, the loan is then forgiven, and if not, the couple must pay back the loan.[xlvii] Additionally, couples with three or more children are eligible for additional tax and interest benefits of up to the equivalent of $50,000 US dollars per family.[xlviii] Given that the average yearly salary in Hungary is equivalent to around $12,000 per year, these are extraordinarily appealing financial incentives for straight couples. [49]

In addition to the CSOK, the Hungarian government has modified the National Core Curriculum taught in schools. All gender norms have since been codified as inherited, and the biological nature of these norms are emphasized.[xlix] Sex education in Hungary revolves around healthy pregnancies, breastfeeding, and heterosexual family life.[l] In 2019, a new state-sponsored schoolbook contained several anti-abortion references.[li] Hungarian universities have also seen changes in their curriculum with the elimination of graduate-level gender studies programs, and the implementation of graduate-level programs entitled "Economics of Family Policy and Public Policies for Human Development."[lii] This change was made without consultation of the affected universities and was enforced by the government, which claimed that gender studies programs were threats to their ideology and incompatible with their conservative views of family and nation.[liii] It is important to note the government's citation of gender studies as incompatible with their views of family *and nation.* This solidifies the premise that women in Hungary are seen as symbols of the nation and that control over their reproductive systems is essential to the nationalistic agenda of Orbán's administration. This indoctrination through education has the

dual effect of enforcing politically favorable views on children of Hungary and limiting the efficacy of any opposition since opposition would contradict the ideas children were taught at a young age.

Reproductive Rights in Hungary

It is not surprising that the use of contraceptives in Hungary have dropped dramatically since these changes have been implemented. In 1993, nearly 60% of Hungarian women reported using birth control pills.[liv] By 2019, the usage dropped to just 12%.[lv] While Hungarian public policy regarding *access* to birth control pills has not significantly changed, this points to a change in the mindset of the female population of Hungary, which is continuously bombarded with nationalistic propaganda that ties their value to the state almost entirely to their childbearing proficiency. This consistent rejection of responsible family planning reflects the insidious effects of Orbán's pro-birth campaign and shows that the minds of both men and women have been influenced by this anachronistic, nationalistic rhetoric.

Similarly, Hungary has also instituted restrictions placed on abortion rights. In 2012, they became the first and only country in the European Union to declare that a fetus' right to life begins at conception, and embedded that declaration within its constitution.[lvi] Also in 2012, the Family Protection Act was passed, which reinforced the right to life from conception.[lvii] A campaign launched in 2011 depicted women who sought abortions as murderers and portrayed the European Union as evil due to the regulations that enforce a woman's right to reproductive health.[lviii] Even though the European Union demanded this campaign be cut short, a similar message was revived in 2013 in Hungary's "Every Child's Place in the Family" campaign.[lix] While a 1992 law in Hungary legalized abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy, recent

restrictions have made access to that difficult.[lx] The abortion pill was outlawed in 2012.[lxi] For a surgical abortion, a woman must first prove that her pregnancy is high risk for her or the fetus, or that she is pregnant due to a crime.[lxii] Once a woman proves this, she must endure a three-day waiting period known as the "cooling-off" period, and attend two mandatory counseling sessions.[lxiii] These sessions attempt to persuade women who are seeking abortions to instead keep their baby.[lxiv] She must then obtain permission from the Family Protection Services, and only after these multiple steps have been completed is she permitted to receive an abortion.[lxv]

Additionally, these appointments are becoming more and more difficult to get, even though abortions are time-sensitive. Unfortunately, it is impossible to receive one without all these steps being taken first.[lxvi] Wealthy Hungarian women may be able to bypass such restrictions and processes by traveling to a neighboring country for an abortion, but this is not a realistic option for many women.[lxvii] As such, many women in Hungary face undue duress in seeking abortions.

In October 2019, Orbán officially co-sponsored a Geneva declaration saturated in anti-abortion and family-first language.[lxviii] The Geneva Consensus Declaration is non-binding, but is still a clear rejection of an international right to abortion.[lxix] Hungary was accompanied on the declaration by twenty countries in the world most characterized by abominable women's rights records, and while the declaration does not make any legal changes, the endorsement speaks to Orbán's views on abortion and family.[lxx] Although no new abortion restrictions have been formally imposed since 2012, Orbán's signature on the Geneva Consensus Declaration is ominous. Given the current ambiguity in the laws, which permit abortion in a 1992 law but then guarantee a right to life from conception in 2011, the trajectory from the recent past suggests that

there is potential for Orbán and Fidesz to align the inconsistent policies by way of outlawing abortion entirely.

Minority Women in Hungary

Possibly, Prime Minister Orbán has not yet outlawed abortion because of the rate at which it is used by women outside of the preferred national identity. For example, Romani babies currently count for twenty percent of births in Hungary.[lxxi] When Romani women from low-income households request abortions in Hungary, the government offers little to no resistance.[lxxii] As noted by one women's rights expert, "[t]he government doesn't want their babies; they want white middle-class babies."[lxxiii] Other methods of controlling the reproduction of Romani women have been reported in Hungary, such as forced sterilization.[lxxiv] Access to abortion and forced sterilization are two ways that the Hungarian government seeks to minimize the rising Romani population, which is projected to rise from seven percent of Hungary's total population to fifteen percent in the next thirty years.[lxxv] This shows how the government is not seeking the birth of any baby, but rather a baby that is compliant with their preferred national identity. The duality of treatment towards women in Hungary demonstrates the ways in which the government uses the reproductive systems of women as political battlegrounds through which nationalism may be controlled.

Conclusion

Both Fidesz and Prime Minister Orbán have imposed their anti-immigration, pro-birth, nationalistic policies on Hungary during their tenure, and women in the country have borne the brunt of the government's nationalistic practices. As a result, women in Orbàn's Hungary have

been subject to oppression, and now women are seen by the government as people whose only contribution to the state is their ability to birth Hungarian children. This is a side effect of nationalistic fervor, which is characterized by a belief that migrants are "poison" and that the only babies worth having are those who fit in the Minister's vision.[lxxvi]

Recalling the definitions of nationalism as an "imagined community" in which specific roles and ideals are imposed on society, it is clear that Hungary imposes specific gender roles on their women. The imagined community perpetrated by Prime Minister Orbàn in which women stay home, birth babies, and raise Hungarian children has become a reality for many women due to the restriction of abortion access and aggressive heteronormative campaigns. These acts are met by reports of forced sterilization of minority women, exemplifying the desire to control who births babies in Hungary and further solidify the "imagined community." Prime Minister Orbàn has aggressively imposed a conservative, Christian society over Hungary, furthering Hungarian nationalism through the control of women's bodies.

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