

Dear Conference participants,

It is a great honor to have the opportunity to speak to you at this amazing gathering. And it is a real joy to see how many of Europe's best and most committed scholars, scholars-to-be, and activists brought their vast range of knowledge here to discuss an issue that I truly hope will be one of the key issues in the social sciences and in societies in the 21st century. I'll bring to you a field-worker's perspective, and hope you will forgive me for not being very academic.

Before I go on, I need to notify you that according to some people I am an optimist. Now, you won't see much of that in the first part of my speech. I'll sound like I just returned from Dante's Inferno and found out that's my address. But don't let me ruin your mood! Consider that part simply as sharing information with you. I'll find another home by the end.

I cannot help but start with a quote from a certain „chantalzola” – a username from a post at a site I came across by chance. The site was discussing the proposal for the new Constitution of Hungary:

chantalzola wrote: „Bleh. I don't know what else to say, especially since I'm currently reading a non-fiction book that is partially about Hungary in the [14th century].”

Apparently, *chantalzola* is less satisfied with us than the Pope. Our government's recent efforts to return us to 14th century standards seem to please His Holiness much better.

A glance around us, and many of us tend to go „Bleh”. The world seems to be dealing with this small country a lot recently. As one of the German papers put it, nobody in Brussels remembers any country to have hit the front pages of half the world's media right before its EU presidency. We managed. A glance around us at this time in Hungary reveals why.

As I know you can all hardly wait for me to stop talking – and I have just started – and for you to be able to start eating, I will just refer here in passing to the issues most of you have heard about anyway. It is hard to miss them in those front pages. The new media law that made the hair of so many stand on end. The nationalization of private pension funds, and the Hungarian Presidency championing the program of “Roma-inclusion” by a prime minister who actually drew concrete political profit from the wave of extreme anti-Roma violence in Hungary in 2008-9. There are more, but let us turn our glance to our more immediate concern: gender issues.

It wasn't exactly a rose garden under the socialist-liberal government either. Here is

the recent past:

1. The Hungarian Parliament turned down a bill on the quota for women in political participation in 2007, reiterating as newly found wisdom age old senseless arguments that in happier parts of the world are already just a bad historical memory: you know, political positions should be based on merits, and the like – I call this a shame.

2. The legislation on protecting women and children from perpetrators of domestic violence took 8 years of intensive lobbying, when the world is full of excellent examples, one right next door in Austria, as some of you may know. This is clearly a mark of the lack of political will. Consequently the result of our lobbying efforts is a weak compromise of a restraining order law in 2009 – I call it a missed opportunity to show commitment.

3. The criminalization of buyers of the bodies of under-age girls was only enacted in 2007 as an obligatory though belated response to the EU directive. But even after 3 years law enforcement has not learned the law: it is still the 17 year old prostituted girl they throw into prison for the minor offense of „standing in the wrong” place, not the buyer – I call it a scandal.

4. After being in power for eight years, the left wing government passed the National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men in January 2010. While the NAP is an important achievement and women's NGOs were glad, it was already clear that the government would lose the elections. The Implementation Order for the NAP that defines the tasks for the first two years of the 11-year strategy was passed on April 21 – 10 days after losing the elections. Thus, in an overly optimistic strike, the socialist-liberal coalition gave the task of creating gender equality in Hungary to the conservative party. Because in 8 years of governance they did not find the time? – a burlesque, by all means.

5. This National Action Plan was in fact a sound document. It was compiled by gender-experts. Well, to be precise it was sound with the exception of the chapter on violence against women. Not only feminists know that violence against women is the core method to keep gender inequality intact. Ministries apparently know it as well – accordingly this chapter was castrated into clichés. In any case, the National Action Plan contained no financial allocations whatsoever – Isn't this a final parody of the issue?

6. In 2010, still under the socialist-liberal coalition, the government appointed a Hungarian candidate to the CEDAW Committee. A success story for the women's NGOs recommending the nominee. Except that it withdrew the nomination right before the elections with the official explanation that every other UN committee

where Hungary had a stake was more important than CEDAW – a final slap to women days before passing power over to the right.

Most people would not brag much about the fact that their name was withdrawn by their own government, right? I don't brag about it either. But I surely refuse to feel ashamed: the shame, I believe, falls on our decision-makers, and the story represents the tides against which we work here.

But here we are, with a fresh government, so we keep glancing around. What we find is... they are really working hard to put women on the track back to the middle ages:

1. An ad hoc parliamentary committee consisting exclusively of the 28 male and 2 female representatives of the governing right wing (because the left and the extreme right officially walked out of the process hurt that their suggestions were not integrated – and this is not me making a joke) is about to recommend a new Constitution for the people of Hungary. This new Constitution offers protection of life from the moment of conception: potentially effectively outlawing abortion in opposition to 70% of public opinion, and introducing maybe the worlds strictest restriction on abortion, according to analysts, potentially stricter than that in Ireland, Poland and Malta. This is somehow not mentioned in any of the Presidency opening addresses about priorities, but I will come back to that.

2. The „fathers” also propose that Hungary's new Constitution enshrines the exclusively heterosexual marriage as the only form of a family worthy of protection.

3. And, to make sure we continue our journey all the way back to the 14th century, the new Constitution would further strengthen the rules regulating modifications to the text, thus making it effectively impossible to change it with anything less than a revolution.

4. The so called National Machinery for gender equality has been reduced to a two-staff members, 18 thousand-Euros per year department.

6. For half a year it was impossible to even find out who represents gender issues in the government.

7. The first meeting under the Hungarian Presidency of the High Level Group on gender mainstreaming was held three days ago. One day after the meeting, the plan for the next 6 months was announced on the official page. Just one presidency apart from Spain and two from Sweden, don't expect Hungary to fall short! Now I am going to commit the ultimate speaker suicide: I'll voluntarily put you to sleep. I am going to read to you the whole integral extent of the Hungarian Presidency's

communication on the work of the Group. Take a deep breath, you can hold it, it's only seven lines:

„The Hungarian Presidency will host the regular meeting of the High Level Group on gender mainstreaming. The agenda will be drafted by the Commission. At this moment we foresee the following possible topics for discussion: - gender equality issues in relation to renewing and strengthening the European Pact for Gender Equality; - preparation and co-ordination of activities of the 54th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (UN); - the Council's follow-up of the UN's Beijing Action Plan; - the Commission's annual report on equality between women and men.”

Positively brimming with initiative, right? Not right. It radiates an attitude of „let's somehow get away with it, this will be over soon anyway. Let's hope nobody notices we don't even know what gender means”.

And don't be mistaken! The right wing, with it's rhetoric about women almost indistinguishable from the rhetoric of the extreme right, makes it clear for everybody who cares to look: in the first Presidency address the issue of women and men appears only related to the EPSCO (Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council) program, and only once: It is discussed under the heading “demographic challenges, and the problems of an aging population”. The context? Challenges created by the reconciliation of work and family life, active aging, solidarity between generations and the plan to introduce to the Commission the recommendation for a European Year of the Family. The only mention of women and men comes in the name of the European Pact for Gender Equality. Not only those of us in this room who grew up in socialist regimes can read between these line, right? Anyway, for those not having mastered the art of reading between lines, the government provides extremely clear clues in the proposed constitution: women should produce offspring in their ever lasting heterosexual marriages that the European Year of the Family will hopefully endorse as the solution to demographic challenges.

I asked around what urgent messages some of the best informed feminists wanted me to convey to you. Here's what they told me:

A fellow activist, economist, and social researcher, Anna Betlen, wants you to consider that Hungary is a society where professional skills are far outweighed by loyalty to patriarchal hierarchy and deference to power. Therefore even where we have institutions – like e.g. the network of visiting nurses and family support centers that Hungary is said to be famous for in the international professional arena – these become part of the patriarchal value system and use their power to keep women (and children) in line.

If I may venture into the field of expertise of some of you, I'd like to complement this with a thought: Hungary is not the only country in the region with a history of decades under communist regime. But Hungarians even then knew that they had it better than their neighbors. They learned to keep their heads down, compromise and not make waves. This bred a particular brand of conformism and non- reaction that seems to persist until today.

From an educator, trainer and NGO colleague, Györgyi Tóth the message is that this is not going to change easily. Central Eastern Europe, as a region sharing a dictatorial recent past, is „different”. In our experience, Hungary is even “more different”. Ours is a society that lags behind most other European countries in social participation, in volunteering and in interest in human rights. According to the findings of a survey conducted among youth in 2004, the most important element of being a „good citizen” for young Hungarians is the willingness and discipline to follow rules. Importance attached to social participation was somewhere in the range of minus 0.6 – last among 13 European countries.

Again, let me complement it with an observation: Hungary is also “more different” in the area of women's activism. And no matter if we are believers in the participation of Western funders and feminists in the early period of the transition in CEE countries as beneficial or as harmful, it is a fact that Hungary was one of the two or three countries in the region where funding for women's programs was not available in those times. It was not available, because decision makers in key funding positions (Hungarians and, often, women) said we don't have a gender issue in Hungary, so there is no need. Hungarian civil society in the field of gender never had a kick-off even remotely similar to many other fields (environmentalists, Roma, refugees, or men's civil rights to name just a few). The lack of initial funding of course had it's effects which we carry even today: there are about 5-6 NGOs defining themselves as working based on feminist and/or women's human rights values today in this country.

The next message comes to you from a judge, Ágnes Galajda. When we advocate for women's rights in our everyday legal work at courts, police, child guardianship authorities and legislators, we are not totally lacking in tools. After all, this is a democratic country with laws. Non-discriminatory laws, of course. But our tools keep failing. Because what holds our patriarchal system, including the justice system, together is a massive and seemingly impenetrable web of prejudices, stereotypes, clinging to power and ignorance – maybe out of lack of social participation...

From every friend I heard the unsaid message that I am conveying to you now: strengthen your already enormous efforts to look into ways and means to help dismantle prejudices, educate against stereotypes and overcome ignorance. Do it in

your countries and make your countries foster it here! Don't leave us alone, because it's harder than it seems from outside. It's harder than we could ever imagine or were willing to admit.

The international networks are vital sources of support. And we need a lot of support, because even when all women are targeted, there is just a few to stand up for them.

So an occasion such as this is one is of those rare blessed moments when we can glance among us. And feel the support. And feel the power we can represent. We need that.

We need you to take these messages over to your lecture halls, to your students, to fellow researchers and to decision makers. We need you to make sure that the world does not think that by joining the EU Hungary (or other countries similar to it) do not need special attention. Special scrutiny even. It is easy to slide backwards. It is easy to loose ground, even easier if the ground was never solid. A friend from an NGO in Slovakia once asked me: "can we talk about backlash without making any step forward in CEE?"

Yes, we can. We have proof of that. We have proof that hostility towards women can increase even if and where true equality never existed. We have proof that a Penal Code already treating women like objects of male possession and subjects under male rule can be made worse even without inserting overtly discriminatory sections to it. We have proof that even where there are no policies and training on gender equality and women's human rights, new laws and policies can be drawn to actively deny those rights. We have proof that where lack of state funding already makes women's programs almost impossible to carry out, there is still the possibility to cut foreign resources and effectively make women's NGOs and gender-research shrink or disappear altogether.

We all know that sexism is back. In old and new forms, with old and new rhetoric. We know that it appeals to many women. Many of us know that we have to re-think our notion of „post feminism”. We all see that patriarchy is absolutely well and kicking, often literally. The extent of sexism may be different in various countries. In countries where there was a women's movement in the recent historic past, there may be just enough counter-voices. Not so in a country like Hungary. The few counter-voices in a society like ours are easily silenced.

If only I could, I would ask you to all stay here. If I could, I would ask you to make up for the missing crowd that should be our women's movement here. But I cannot ask that. So instead I am asking you to carry these messages with you, to urge your students to be critical, questioning, not be afraid to import the gender perspective into

all their work and, most of all, to participate. Actively. Mostly in women's projects of course :).

With the passage of time, and the integration into Europe the upcoming generation now has a chance to distance themselves from a resigned political posture. To acquire the rebellious spirit that is so lacking in their parents.

I believe that every child is born a feminist. Because every child knows the difference between justice and injustice. They know it in their cells. But every child also grows up in a world where justice is often considered less important than other things. They are taught to trust adults just because they are adults, and thus, to trust authority. They learn to distrust their cells. Yet many children will preserve that truth in the core of their being. Until they meet somebody who vindicates their instinct. Often, it is a professor at a university, like most of you here today. This is what happened to me. Let them know that, with the words of Martin Luther King, „we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.” Keep offering food for the critical mind and options for those who want to act. Then a future of equality, that can simply be nothing other than feminist, is ensured.

Remember that at the beginning of the speech I promised you some show of my optimism? Well, I seem to have lied, no? No, not really. My optimism is awakened by gatherings such as this. It was overflowing as I read the richest conference program I have seen in a long time. And it took me over altogether when I saw the number of participants and the diversity of the countries you represent. This is a home I belong to, and this is the feeling I'll take away from here.

Thank you for having me here tonight.