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Labor in State-Socialist Europe, 1945–1989

*Contributions
to a History of Work*

Edited by
Marsha Siefert



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“It Shall Not Be a Written Gift, but a Lived Reality”: Equal Pay, Women’s Work, and the Politics of Labor in State-Socialist Hungary, Late 1960s to Late 1970s¹

Susan Zimmermann

In the late 1960s, *Women of the Whole World*, the journal of the communist-led Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), repeatedly discussed gendered wage discrimination. At the time the WIDF, a large organization advocating women’s rights and equality worldwide, was preparing for the 1969 World Congress of Women it was convening in Helsinki, where “Women at work” would feature as one major theme. There was no hint on the pages of *Women of the Whole World* that unequal pay existed in state-socialist countries. Under the heading “One Woman = ...%?” a series of reports on Argentina, France, the United Kingdom, Japan, the Federal Republic of Germany, Sweden, and the US documented pervasive and large-scale gendered wage discrimination—exclusively in capitalist countries.² The omission of the state-socialist countries—even whilst it confirms stereotypical views on WIDF biases in general³—is remarkable when read against the fact that WIDF and *Women of the Whole World* regularly discussed the need for “further” improvement of working women’s situation in state-socialist countries. If unequal pay under state socialism was even a taboo for *Women of the Whole World*, the same was all the more true for

¹ The IGK Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History (re:work), gave fabulous support as I wrote this study during my fellowship period. I am grateful for the valuable comments by several readers on an earlier draft, to Marsha Siefert for her invaluable support in polishing the final draft, and to Francisca de Haan who shared the relevant issues of the journal *Women of the Whole World* (originally, I had used the German version). I am particularly indebted to my interview partners.

² See *Women of the Whole World* (1968), no. 3.

³ On these views, see Francisca de Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women’s Organisations: The Case of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF),” *Women’s History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 547–73.

official state socialism. Women's wage discrimination, in other words, was a non-issue in the state-socialist world of the 1960s. Everywhere, violations of the equal pay principle were deemed scattered instances of local mismanagement and subject to immediate and local rectification, which as a rule had been already completed by reporting time. In Hungary, for instance, the Trade Union of Workers of the Building, Wood, and Construction Materials Industries (*Építő-, Fa-, és Építőanyagipari Dolgozók Szakszervezete*, ÉFÉDSZ) in 1968 described the problem of unequal pay as an "isolated" phenomenon addressed by local trade union bodies on a case-by-case basis.⁴

And yet, systematic gendered wage inequality and discrimination constituted a pervasive feature of the world of work in state-socialist Hungary. One exemplary 1970 survey, carried out in four milk-producing enterprises in urban and rural settings across Hungary for presentation to the branch Trade Union Council, gave data on 544 women workers, 47 percent unskilled and 33 percent semi-skilled (*betanított*). The report examined one key element of how unequal pay was generated and could be captured quantitatively: the average hourly wage grades (*átlagos besorolási órabér*) of male and female workers. The gender comparison did not give a "reassuring picture." The biggest difference was "found in category 13, comprising the single largest group of the women workers; no skill whatsoever is required for this work and it comes with a strong physical burden." The women's wage grading lagged far behind: "1.79 [Hungarian Forint], 20 percent."⁵

The report was signed by Mrs. Géza Reiner⁶ and Mária Bánfalvi, two women visibly involved in what can be identified as a campaign against unequal pay which began to unfold in Hungary at the time. Trade union women, including female trade union functionaries at all levels and some academic allies, played an important role in generating and sustaining the campaign, which developed against the backdrop of a series of top-level decisions

⁴ "Az építő-, fa-, és építőanyagipar területén foglalkoztatott nődolgozók élet és munkakörülményei javításának feladatai" [The tasks for improvement of the living and working conditions of the female workforce employed in the building, wood, and building material industries], Politikatörténeti Intézet Levéltára [Institute of Political History, Archives, hereafter PIL], Szakszervezetek Központi Levéltára [Central Trade Unions' Archive, hereafter SZKL] 2. f. 19 / 1968–1969 / 1 doboz / 1 ö.e., November 11, 1968.

⁵ In the highest two categories populated by women, the lagging-behind was around 13 percent. "Előterjesztés a [Tejipari] Szakszervezeti Tanács 1970. október 6-án tartandó ülésre" [Submission to the meeting of the Trade Union Council (of the milk-producing industries) to be held on October 6, 1970], PIL, SKZL 2. f. 19 / 1970 / 1 doboz, September 23, 1970.

⁶ The name of married women in Hungary at the time was given as composed of "Mrs." and the given name, as well as the family name, of their husband. In foreign languages the trade union women used to give their husband's family name and their own given name. Whenever I know the given name of a woman, I will use this foreign language version.

in 1970. These decisions triggered major reform and institutional restructuring, altering and broadening the mandate of women’s politics pursued by the state-socialist regime in Hungary. A directive issued in February 1970 by the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, MSZMP) spearheaded the chain of decisions. The follow-up government decision 1013/1970 (May 10) codified the distribution of responsibilities and tasks to the various actors and institutions concerned. The MSZMP directives charged the National Council of Hungarian Women (*Magyar Nők Országos Szövetsége*, MNOT) of many of its earlier responsibilities in Hungarian women’s politics, reassigning these responsibilities to the trade unions and other “mass organizations” instead. The enhancement of the trade unions’ role came as a response to the steady rise in women’s participation in the labor force, together with strongly felt tensions concerning both the condition of women at the workplace and the involvement of working women in childcare and family work. The latter, construed as a gender-specific given and labeled the “second shift,” put a heavy burden on working women. The National Federation of Trade Unions (*Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége*, SZOT) duly followed up on these decrees with its own foundational directive concerning the trade union contribution to the new women’s policies. SZOT decreed a major organizational overhaul of trade union women’s policies, including: the establishment of a Central Women’s Committee (*Központi Nőbizottság*) of SZOT, known as SZOTNB, working alongside the SZOT leadership; a small apparatus which, under the direct leadership of the responsible SZOT secretary, would be responsible for women’s politics; and the establishment of a network of trade union representatives—in reality women in most cases—in charge of all issues related to women (the function was called the *nőfelelős*, which literally translates into “women responsible,” and will be given in the following as “trade union representative responsible for women’s issues”)⁷ within the national trade unions and the Trade Union County Councils (*Szakszervezetek Megyei Tanácsa*, SZMT).⁸

⁷ The function of the trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues became ubiquitous at various levels of the trade union hierarchy, as well as in factories and other institutions after 1970, though it had also existed previously. The trade union representative responsible for women’s issues was an individual appointed to take responsibility for all matters related to women in a given setting (such as a factory division, a local trade union branch, etc.) especially in those cases when there was no formal women’s committee.

⁸ *Dokumentumok a nők gazdasági és szociális helyzetének megjavításáról* [Documents on the improvement of the economic and social position of women] (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1971). The party directive issued in February 1970, other related original material, and the follow-up directives and resolutions can be found in this publication. The territorial council covering Budapest, the capital city, carried a different name; I include it here and in the following under the label SZMT.

These 1970 directives, regulations, and accompanying official statements which soon were collectively referred to as *nőhatározat* (literally “women directive,” translated in the following as “Directive(s) on women’s issues”) were issued in the context of decentralizing economic reform, the New Economic Mechanism (*Új gazdasági mechanizmus*) introduced in 1968, and a climate—according to historian Eszter Bartha—of rather open political exchanges on social and economic tensions, supported by dialogue between the working class and the regime, including the trade unions.⁹ They also came after the introduction of extended paid maternity leave in 1967, which was to form a core element of an emerging politics designed to ease the burden which the labors of social reproduction put on working women.¹⁰ The directives on women’s issues also involved a strong focus on increasing material and institutional support for raising children. The scholarship on working women and gender regimes in state-socialist countries after 1953/1956 has focused on these changes. The historian Donna Harsch, who studied this evolution in the GDR, argues that measures like those undertaken in Hungary, aiming to alleviate the burden of maternity and childcare while not directly tackling paid work, reflected the increasing dependence of the state-socialist economy on the female labor force.¹¹

In institutional terms, the Directive(s) on women’s issues moved the center of state-socialist women’s politics to the workplace.¹² The institutional overhaul of central trade union women’s politics brought about by these directives triggered concomitant changes down to the factory level. Together, these changes created much greater room for an emerging network of trade union women dedicated to promoting working women’s interests as construed at the time. The inclusion of a proactive politics of equal pay—described in this chapter as a campaign for equal pay—which formed part of these unfolding women’s policies had been triggered by

⁹ Eszter Bartha, *Alienating Labour: Workers on the Road from Socialism to Capitalism in East Germany and Hungary* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), ch. 1.

¹⁰ Mária Adamik, “Supporting Parenting and Child Rearing: Policy Innovation in Eastern Europe,” in *Child Care, Parental Leave, and the Under 3s: Policy Innovation in Europe*, ed. Sheila B. Kamerman and Alfred Kahn (New York: Auburn House, 1991); András Gábor and István György Tóth, “A gyermekvállalás támogatásának gazdasági motívumai és hatásai” [Economic motivations and results of the support for having children], *Századvég. Új folyam* 5, no. 19 (2000): 87–92.

¹¹ Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹² Similar processes also took place in other state-socialist countries. For the GDR, see Hertha Kuhrig, “‘Mit den Frauen’—‘Für die Frauen’: Frauenpolitik und Frauenbewegung in der DDR” [“With the women”—“for the women”: Women’s politics and the women’s movement in the GDR], in *Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung*, ed. Florence Hervé, 6th ed. (Cologne: PapyRossa, 1998), 218–19, 222.

SZOT’s 1969 report issued in preparation of the Directive(s) on women’s issues. SZOT declared that it was the task of the trade unions “to effectuate the effective implementation of the ‘principle of equal pay for equal work.’ The trade union organs shall regularly control women’s remuneration, and call upon the competent authorities to correct the observed shortcomings.”¹³ The 1970 MSZMP and government decrees duly included related demands and measures. The publicized rationale for the decision to pursue a more proactive politics of equal pay focused on political considerations alone. In his speech introducing the related measures, Árpád Pullai, the Central Committee secretary responsible for party issues and mass organizations, argued that in a state-socialist society, as a “society based in work” (*munka társadalma*), equal pay “is an accepted principle and practice, and also meets people’s sense of justice.”¹⁴

In this chapter I explore the politics of (un)equal pay in Hungarian state industries as unfolding against these backgrounds. In the first section I present evidence on women’s work and wage policies in state-socialist Hungary to explain how the politics of (un)equal pay were construed at the time. In the second section I describe the argument and action that constituted the campaign for equal pay, spearheaded by the Directive(s) on women’s issues, unfolding within this context. I also detail how this campaign was systematically tied to references to various political and economic characteristics and tensions of the state-socialist project. Taken together, these references can be categorized as falling into two larger framings, “the politics of women’s work in the macro-economy” and the “politics of labor.” In the third and fourth sections of the chapter I examine how argument and action intended to narrow or reify the gender wage gap were tied into and influenced by these larger framings. The actors themselves, as they referred to these framings and discursively construed them, situated the gendered politics of labor within the state-socialist project as a whole. Consideration of these framings and, more generally, an inclusive approach to the history of the politics of women’s work under state socialism allows the history of labor and gender

¹³ “Jelentés a dolgozó nők társadalmi, gazdasági, szociális helyzetéről és közöttük végzett szakszervezeti munkáról” [Report on the societal, economic, and social condition of the working women, and the trade union work carried out amongst them], SZOT Division for organizational and cadre work, PIL, SZKL 2. f. 3 / 416 ö.e., May 26, 1969. In the draft version of the Report the formula had not yet been used.

¹⁴ Trade union women and their allies had played a visible role in bringing about the inclusion of a focus on equal pay into the “women directive”—a finding not discussed in this chapter. Pullai’s speech is given in *A nők politikai, gazdasági és szociális helyzete: Az MSZMP Központi Bizottságának 1970. február 18–19.-i ülése* [Women’s political, economic and social position: The February 18–19 session of the Central Committee of the MSZMP] (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1970), 8–9.

under state socialism to be conceived as part and parcel of an overarching political history of gender, class, and economic development. Focusing on one particular element of gendered labor policies, such as equal pay, can contribute to developing a more satisfactory understanding of gender and labor within the project of state socialism. In the concluding section I discuss the relevance of some of my findings for the larger contexts of the history of labor under state socialism, the gender regime and women's politics under state socialism, and for situating state socialism within the larger context of the history of labor and gender in the twentieth century.

Conceiving of the Politics of (Un)equal Pay in a State-Socialist Context

In state-socialist Hungary unequal pay between women and men was a phenomenon embedded in a highly complex, multilayered, state-led system of wage policies. In turn, the politics of equal pay could be conceived as a broadly defined and manifold policy agenda, and indeed were conceptualized and pursued this way in the 1970s. As the campaign for equal pay unfolded, (un)equal remuneration of women and men was captured in relation to four different criteria, namely: industrial branch or industry; skill level or grading; difference between enterprises; and intra-enterprise wage differentials. In addition, wage differentials between women and men of similar standing doing identical work—the classical, and simultaneously narrowest, definition of unequal pay—were discussed with reference to the situation at particular workplaces.

Reference to these four different criteria provided an inclusive framing of the politics of equal pay, against the background of both various gendered characteristics of industrial work at the time and a number of particular characteristics of state-socialist wage policies. Important features of these wage policies relevant for the politics of retaining and challenging unequal pay remained in substance—notwithstanding all the reform measures and changes—both before and after the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1968 and through its subsequent alterations.

In state-socialist Hungary, women constituted an ever-growing proportion of industrial labor. In 1949, 21.7 percent of the industrial labor force had been female; by 1975 the figure had risen to 44.9 percent.¹⁵ From the

¹⁵ Júlia Turgonyi and Zsuzsa Ferge, *Az ipari munkásnők munka- és életkörülményei* [The work and life circumstances of industrial women workers] (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvki-

1960s onwards it was public knowledge that the unceasing demand for additional industrial labor could only be satisfied by drawing even more women into paid work. The female labor force in industry was unevenly distributed amongst the various branches, and the “feminized” industries tended to be characterized by a low overall wage level in comparison to more male-dominated and mixed branches. In 1970, the average wages in light industry reached a level of 87.8 percent of the wages in industry as a whole.¹⁶ In all industries taken together, the proportion of women was much higher among the large group of unskilled and semi-skilled workers than among skilled industrial workers. In 1975, only 15.4 percent of all skilled workers were female. In 1984, 19.7 percent of all women workers worked at the assembly line as opposed to 3.7 percent of the men.¹⁷ A deliberate policy of decentralizing industrialization aimed to capture the “scattered remaining reserves” of female labor,¹⁸ often with extremely low wages and miserable labor conditions.¹⁹ In sum, the data indicate that women workers formed a large stratum of underprivileged and often harshly exploited industrial “mass workers.”

The broadly conceived politics of equal pay explicitly related to these characteristics of women’s industrial work. Branch-specific special wage policies and special wage increases for “feminized” industries could be defined as elements of the politics of narrowing the gender wage gap. The relevant basic decisions were made at the national level or within individual ministries which could decide on differential wage allocation between the industries or branches they supervised. SZOT and each individual national trade union had to be fully involved in these processes, since they enjoyed

adó, 1969), 17; Júlia Turgonyi and Mrs. Sándor Garai, “Összefoglaló tanulmány a SZOT nőpolitikai állásfoglalása és határozata (1970. július 2.) alapján végzett szakszervezeti munkánkról (Különös tekintettel a foglalkoztatás és a szakképzés kérdéseire)” [Summary study on the work we have carried out on the basis of the SZOT Women Statement and Directive (July 2, 1970) (With a special focus on the questions of employment and vocational training)] (no publisher, no publication date given).

¹⁶ Data for the socialist sector, i.e., including the cooperatives. Data appendix in “Jelentés a dolgozó nők társadalmi, gazdasági, szociális helyzetéről . . . Tervezet” [Report on the societal, economic, and social condition of the working women . . . Draft], SZOTNB, PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1980 / 1 doboz / 4 ö.e., April 25, 1980.

¹⁷ Judit Lakatos, “A fizikai foglalkozásúak munkakörülményei az iparban” [Labor conditions of manual workers in industry], *Statistikai Szemle*, no. 7 (1986): 715–16.

¹⁸ Quoted in Susan Zimmermann, “Gender Regime and Gender Struggle in Hungarian State Socialism,” *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History* 4 (2010): 3.

¹⁹ Statements of Mrs. Bodor and Mrs. Valu, among others, Combined minutes January 18, 19, 29, 1971, “Nőfelelősi értekezlet” [Conference of the trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues], SZOTNB, PIL SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1971 / 3 doboz / 7 ö.e.

the “right of consent” (*egyetértési jogkör*) in all decision-making impacting the work and life circumstances of the working population.²⁰

In addition, the politics of equal pay strongly focused on wage differences between enterprises, and even more so on intra-enterprise wage differentials. This focus of attention, again, followed directly from characteristic features of wage policies in state-socialist Hungary. In the 1970s (and beyond) two different wage distribution systems were applied simultaneously. Both were built around the allocation of a given sum for wages to each enterprise, yet calculated with reference either to the average “wage level” or the overall “wage mass” of a given enterprise. The ministries, which were typically responsible for a number of industries, allocated the wage sum for each enterprise under their control.²¹ In addition, the “central fund” could grant individual enterprises special treatment and finances to “develop” their wages.²²

The enterprises enjoyed considerable freedom with regard to intra-enterprise distribution of the wage fund, the determination and development of the wage spread, and so on. Moreover, there were no nationwide collective agreements unifying the standard wages in a given industry.²³ Instead, the Ministry of Labor issued general tables decreeing the “base wage” (*alapbér*), with reference to skill, labor conditions, and the normal or heavy character of the work done.²⁴ Within the enterprises, the “job-grading” (*besorolás*) of individual workers, taking into consideration the established wage system, constituted the crucial point of reference for generating actual monthly take-home pay. With regard to job-grading the enterprise trade union bodies exercised the “right of consent,” meaning that their agreement

²⁰ Márton Buza and Tibor Simó, eds., *Szakszervezeti lexikon* [Trade union encyclopedia] (Budapest: Népszava, 1986), 124; Politikatörténeti Intézet (PTI), ed., *Érdekegyeztetés Dokumentumok 1966–1975* [Documents on the coordination of interests, 1966–1975], 29–30, available online at http://polhist.hu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/erdekegy_dok_1956_1965.pdf, accessed October 14, 2015.

²¹ The 1970 Regulation is given in *A SZOT határozatai és a szakszervezeti mozgalmat érintő állami jogszabályok* [The SZOT decisions and the state regulations concerning the trade union movement], vol. 2 (Budapest: Táncsics Könyvkiadó, 1973), 291–328; Donát Bonifert, *A bérszabályozás: Hogyan kezdődött? Hová jutott? Merre tart?* [The wage regulation: How did it begin? What are the results? In which direction does it go?] (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1987), 65–73, 81–85, 91–92, 144–45.

²² “KNEP Utmutató...” [KNEP Guide...], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1971 / 3 doboz / 4 ó.c., June 26, 1971.

²³ The National Branch Wage Tables introduced in 1975 did not replace these general Tables. Bonifert, *A bérszabályozás*, 58, 85, 143–44.

²⁴ *A SZOT határozatai*, 2:332–40. The ranges had not been substantively narrowed in the early 1980s: see Géza Bogyai, *Jogi ismeretek szakszervezeti tisztségviselőknek* [Legal knowledge for trade union functionaries] (Budapest: Táncsics Könyvkiadó, 1981), 201.

was necessary.²⁵ The given annual wage sum for any enterprise was distributed amongst the employees through collective agreements concluded between the economic management and the enterprise’s trade union representatives. These collective agreements had to include detailed regulations about grading principles and other elements of the wage system.²⁶ Payment by result, generated according to the labor norms and job-grading of the individual worker, was to be preferred whenever economically rational. The enterprises were responsible for setting the norms. If the director of a given enterprise had approved a given norm or a change thereof, then the employee had no right to challenge the decision.²⁷

Taken together, the wage system described here in broad strokes²⁸ was driven by a centrally decreed framework and included national and branch-specific wage policies, enterprise-level policies, and intra-enterprise bargaining. This allowed for considerable wage divergence between different industries, enterprises, and factories. As would become blatantly visible during the campaign for equal pay, these defining features of the wage system tended to work against wage equality between men and women in many ways. Campaigning for equal remuneration of men and women under these circumstances would focus on enterprise-level wage policies, national wage raises for certain branches, and one-time ministerial allocations for certain factories or enterprises, or groups of workers within these settings. Trade unions were required to cooperate in national planning, the policies of the branch ministries, and within the enterprises. Because of this multi-level and cooperative—if hierarchical—character of wage policies, the campaign for equal pay can be characterized as a multi-actor campaign in which the trade unions played a key role.

The Campaign for Equal Pay

The 1970 Directive(s) on women’s issues triggered a wave of organized action and policy-making in favor of equal pay. While shaped by the overall framings of the politics of women’s work and labor policies in general, the

²⁵ Buza and Simó, *Szakszervezeti lexikon*, 72–73, 124.

²⁶ *A SZOT határozatai*, 2:538–55, 576–77.

²⁷ The norms were to be set with reference to general guidelines issued jointly by the Minister of Labor and SZOT, and possibly industry-specific guidelines: see *A SZOT határozatai*, 2:360–63; Bonifert, *A bérszabályozás*, 58; Bogyai, *Jogi ismeretek*, 195.

²⁸ In this chapter, I do not discuss in a comprehensive manner the development of wage policies and the wage system in Hungary at the time, which also included extra-wage components of remuneration such as social services and other social provisions which involved a strong focus on easing the labor of social reproduction.

campaign for equal pay in the 1970s was notable for how reference to restrictive elements of the macroeconomic framing briefly took a backseat.

The campaign for equal pay was characterized by strong trade union intervention and an inclusive vision of the politics of equal pay. This was so even after leading actors such as Árpád Pullai, by foregrounding the implementation of the principle “in practice” and focusing on action within the enterprises and factories in his speech quoted above, had advocated restrictive ideas in the course of making the Directive(s) on women’s issues. As a direct follow-up to the Directive(s), the enterprises had to devise overarching action plans (*intézkedési terv*) on the steps and means of implementing the decision. In parallel, each national trade union had to devise its own action plan aimed at promoting equal pay in the enterprises it covered. The Trade Union of Workers in the Leather Industry (*Bőripari Dolgozók Szakszervezete*, BIDSZ), an industry where 65 percent of the employees (*dolgozó*) were female, soon adopted such a document.²⁹ The BIDSZ action plan aimed to make maximum use of the terms set for trade union initiative in the directives on women’s issues. While it was somewhat exceptional in terms of the detail and enthusiasm of how it designed the new politics of equal pay, the plan was exemplary in identifying—in an inclusive manner—three main dimensions of how unequal pay was generated or perpetuated at the enterprise level. It advocated, firstly, that the Trade Union Commissions (*szakszervezeti bizottság*, SZB)—the base organizations (*alapszervezet*) in the factories—facilitate an examination of the wages paid at those workplaces where “women carry out identical work as compared to men (identical skill, identical practice). They shall examine the experiences in terms of category wages, time wages, and individual job-grading,” and “devise concrete measures.” Secondly, the plan decreed that “every plant has to carry out a survey to determine those categories of work where the majority of workers are women and the wages lag behind [*bérekben lemaradás van*].” The “termination of backward or disproportional wages and the increase of the wage levels” was the goal. Thirdly, the BIDSZ leadership suggested that all leather, shoe, and leatherwear enterprises should examine the “wage spread of the average wages” with the aim to “eliminate monthly wages below 1,300 [Hungarian Forint]. Since the majority of the workers are low-income women workers, this measure in substance would result in the improvement of their condition.” The BIDSZ action plan also aimed to achieve “central” measures. The “conditions and . . . difficulty of work,

²⁹ “Feladatterv a bőriparban dolgozó nők gazdasági és szociális helyzetének javítására” [Action plan for the improvement of the economic and social condition of the working women in the leather industry], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1970 / 1 doboz, BIDSZ Central leadership, July 14, 1970.

as well as the content of the work, are not expressed in a realistic manner in the present wage level” within the leather and shoe industries. Therefore, the top leadership of the trade union “together with the Ministry of Light Industries” was entrusted to “take measures to generate” a more appropriate “wage level,” based on reconsidering the industry’s “importance and service” for the national economy and the prevalent “labor conditions.”

The BIDSZ plan entertained a remarkably broad vision of how the gender wage gap was to be narrowed through a combination of gender- and class-focused measures carried out across all enterprises nationwide, and by central measures. The explicit wage discrimination of individual female workers was to be addressed directly. This was to be complemented by over-proportional wage increases for certain types of work and by abolishing particularly low monthly wages wherever they were found. These two types of special wage improvement for low-income, low-class workers, while designed without explicit reference to gender, were intended to counterbalance deeply ingrained gendered income inequalities.

As the national trade unions and the enterprises began to plan to implement the Directive(s) on women’s issues, some of their activities visibly bore the hallmark of an emerging lobby of female trade unionists dedicated to improving the lot of working women. These women began to take advantage of their new institutional standing and the endorsement of the pro-woman-worker agenda generated by the Directive(s) on women’s issues. The newly established SZOTNB quickly began to work both from “above” and “below.” Its important initial tasks included guidance and support for all actors, from local to national, in operationalizing the tasks described in the Directive(s) into actual policies in their respective spheres of action, controlling implementation at all levels, conducting a two-to-three-week training course for the trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues of the national trade unions and the SZMTs, and contributing to the preparation of the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1971–1975).³⁰

The training course was held in the fall of 1970, and can be considered the most substantial initial activity aimed at building a network amongst upper level trade union functionaries responsible for women’s issues. SZOTNB discussed the program in advance with leading functionaries of the national trade unions and the SZMTs. As a result it was ensured that the concrete “trade union to-dos in relation to the topic”³¹ and informa-

³⁰ “A [SZOTNB] Nőbizottságának programja (1970. VII.1-1971 VI.30): Tervezet” [Program of SZOTNB, July 1, 1970–June 30, 1971: Draft] PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1970 / 1 doboz, n.d.

³¹ Here Mrs. Arpád Barta, Secretary General, Hajdu-Bihar SZMT, to Czerván, PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1970 / 1 doboz, August 10, 1970.

tion on “the place and role of the trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues in the enterprises, factories, and plants”³² were included into the program.³³ One of the conclusions SZOTNB drew from its experience with the first training course was that it was necessary to organize regular meetings with the trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues of the national trade unions and the SZMTs. The first two-day conference of trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues was called in January 1971, and the goal of “eliminating the wage inequalities” figured prominently in preparing for the event.³⁴

The trade union women’s network pushing for working women’s interests—as they defined them—dynamically developed over time, and became increasingly institutionalized. Training courses for the trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues at all levels of the trade union hierarchy, including those in office within the factories, were regularly organized under the guidance of SZOTNB. Information material on the tasks and training of these functionaries was abundant.³⁵ At the workplace, women of diverse standing and disposition took on the various functions, many of them half prompted by party, trade unions, or colleagues, and half on their own initiative—at least as remembered by individuals who took part in the campaign. Two examples may illustrate the variety, ranging from women workers who took on unpaid lower-level trade union duties in addition to their regular jobs,³⁶ to careers which led women as full-time functionaries into the upper levels of the trade union hierarchy.

³² Mrs. Ferenc Ország, National Poultry Enterprise, to Czerván, PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1970 / 1 doboz, September 10, 1970.

³³ The quotes are taken from the critical comments given on the initial program plan. “A SZOT nőfelelős tanfolyam tematikája” [Themes of the SZOT training course for the trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1970 / 1 doboz, n.d.

³⁴ Czerván to József Pandurovics (Leading Secretary of the Budapest SZMT), PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1971 / 2 doboz / 7 ö.e., January 14, 1971.

³⁵ Examples include *Tanterv a nőfelelősök tanfolyama számára* [Curriculum for the training course for trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues] (n.p.: Táncsics Könyvkiadó, 1971); “Tanterv a szakszervezeti bizottságok nőfelelőseink 2 hetes tanfolyamára 1976” [Curriculum for the 1976 two-week training course for our SZB trade union representative responsible for women’s issues], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1976 / 1 doboz / 16 ö.e., n.d.

³⁶ Renate Hürtgen, *Zwischen Disziplinierung und Partizipation: Vertrauensleute des FDGB im DDR-Betrieb* [Between disciplining and participation: FDGB Union stewards in the GDR enterprise] (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2005), discusses in detail the role of women as union stewards in the GDR factories. Hürtgen argues that most of these women duly accepted the subordinated role they played in the factory hierarchy and contributed to stabilization and harmony. Over time, the Union Stewards lost much of their function. The settlement of minute social issues was at the core of their activities, while questions of equal pay were apparently not addressed.

Mrs. Béla Csordás worked three shifts in the Lenin Ironworks in Miskolc, after many years of employment as a sitting ticket inspector. Her testimony was published in a 1980 book based on interviews with women workers. The purpose of the book was to “record the inner image [*belső arculat*] of the women and girls living at the end of the 1970s without any embellishment [*kozmetikázás nélkül*].”³⁷ At the time of the interview Mrs. Csordás worked as a semi-skilled thread roller (*menethengerész*), narrating how “just like an actor in an unforeseen role, I too have gotten at the machine as a substitute [*akárcsak egy színész a váratlan szerepbe, én is beugrással kerültem a hengerlő gépre*].” She described her route into women’s trade union politics, at the very beginning of her time in the Lenin Ironworks when she had had difficulties adjusting to her new industrial work environment, in this way: “The days passed and as I came around, before now my colleagues elected me as a union steward [*bizalmi*], and then brigade leader and trade union representative responsible for women’s issues. I no longer had any time to deal with myself; other people thoroughly commandeered my time.” Years after these events Mrs. Csordás still worked three shifts, since for her this was easier “than getting up every night.” She regularly came to the factory well before her shift began: “because of the functions, there are always things to be discussed.”³⁸

Manyi Csík was employed in the Dunai Ironworks in Dunaújváros, where she had done three years of three-shift work since she graduated from high school. By 1980 she had spent seven years in an administrative position in the Work Competition office of the large plant. Not long before Easter in the year 1980 she went to work,

and then suddenly there was a phone call that I should come down to the party committee at once. I said to myself, Jesus Christ, what’s happened? One needs to know that I was a party member. What has happened. And I go down, and the party secretary of the large enterprise informs me that the party committee has decided that from May 1, I shall become a full-time [*függetlenített*] member of the [SZB] and that I will become the chair of the [trade union] Women’s Committee. I said oh God, I didn’t even know what they were talking about, and I said I would like to ask for respite so that I can think this through, and well, there was no respite, one has to go there, following the instruction of the party. So well, I went home and told my husband, he said, well, mother, then you go

³⁷ Béla Szémann, *Utak, sorsok, asszonyok: Szociográfiai életrajzi riportok munkásnőkről* [Routes, fates, women: Sociographic biographical reports on women workers] (Budapest: Magyar Nők Országos Tanácsa, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1980), 4–10.

³⁸ Szémann, *Utak*, 297–99.

there and do this. Hence I arrived here in 1980, practically at the age of twenty-eight.³⁹

The decision soon turned out to be only the beginning of more far-reaching turnarounds and a life-changing experience which led Manyi Csík into the upper echelons of full-time trade union work in the Trade Union of Workers in the Iron, Metal, and Electrical Industries (*Vas-, Fém- és Villamosenergiaipari Dolgozók Szakszervezete*, VFVDSZ). She continued her narrative:

At the age of twenty-eight in the [SZB]. And well, as I got into the [SZB], with the same momentum they elected me as a member of the Women's Committee of the [VFVDSZ], arguing that this is the place for the first-rank women's leader of such a big industrial enterprise. Well, this period for me conjures up very good memories [*ez az időszak nagyon szép emlékekről szól nekem*], together with the fact that there were many unknown things, I had to learn a lot . . . , but I regarded it my primary goal that I see clearly what the situation of the women in the Dunai Ironworks is, given that in this period we were an enterprise that employed nearly 10,000 people, and more than one third . . . was women . . . , and more than one third [of them] worked in continuous uninterrupted shifts [i.e., including the night shift].⁴⁰

Built in this way, the trade union women's network reached from the factories through the women's committees of the county-level SZMTs and the national trade unions—Manyi Csík belonged to the Women's Committee of the VFVDSZ from 1980—to SZOTNB, where the representatives of the women's committees of the SZMTs and the national trade unions regularly met. SZOTNB, while building and guiding this network, fully engaged with the question of equal pay as an element of the politics of women's work in the macro-economy—"the large relations of economic planning, and the economy-related problems of the further solution of the women's question" within this framing⁴¹—and national-level decision-making on labor policies. SZOTNB urged the SZOT Presidium to ask the National Plan-

³⁹ Manyi Csík, Interview, Audio recording and transcript, September 12, 2016, transcript p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ This is how the content of one of the ten major lectures of the planned training course was circumscribed. Júlia Turgonyi, "Javaslat a [SZOT] által szervezendő nőfelelősi tanfolyam tematikájára" [Proposal for the themes to be covered by the training course for the trade union representatives responsible for women's issues to be organized by SZOT], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1970 / 1 doboz, July 22, 1970.

ning Office (*Országos Tervhivatal*) to include a reference to the Directive(s) on women’s issues, including equal pay, into the objectives of the Fourth Five-Year Plan before it went to Parliament for discussion. Welcoming the planned special pay raises for various groups of employees (in some of which the proportion of women was very high), SZOTNB first demanded the addition of a special pay increase for the textile and garment industries via a “central measure.” This was necessary because in these branches, reflecting the “heritage of the past,” the wage level was “arbitrarily low,” particularly when considering that most of the work in these branches was shift work, characterized by “dictated pace” (*diktált ütemű*) and demanding norms.⁴² Secondly, “[t]he central effort to eliminate women’s wage inequality, [a phenomenon] which has been disclosed by the party too, and [the elimination of which] also has been decreed in the Government decision . . . , is not included into the objectives of the Plan regarding wage issues. We consider it necessary to additionally include this wage measure.”⁴³

In the fall of 1971, taking stock of the experiences amassed during the first year of work for the implementation of the Directive(s) on women’s issues, the SZOT Secretariat realistically summarized that the trade unions had already gained “rich experience especially in terms of revealing and exploiting the local opportunities.”⁴⁴ With regard to equal pay, this meant substantive measures by a considerable number of enterprises that had enacted collective pay raises for (some of) the lowest income groups where these predominantly included women. In one enterprise in Baranya County the raise had been as large as 40 percent. Elsewhere, forty out of 105 women workers had received a special raise of 8 percent, while a group of unskilled (*kisegítő*) kitchen workers was granted a lump sum raise.⁴⁵ The parallel attempts at “abolishing the unjustified [*indokolatlan*] wage differentials” in those cases when women did work identical to that of men within a given enterprise were considered less successful. The enterprises had not yet even “duly scrutinized the magnitude of the unjustified differentials.” SZOT drew a twofold conclusion. Firstly, the enterprises should “devise plans for the gradual and yearly elimination of the disproportions and . . . the deployment of the mate-

⁴² The presentation was “strictly confidential.” See “Előterjesztés a SZOT Elnökségének. [SZOTNB] . . . javaslatai a IV. 5 éves terv főbb célkitűzéseikhez” [Proposal to the SZOT Presidium: The propositions of the SZOTNB on the main goals of the Fourth Five-Year Plan], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1970 / 1 doboz, July 17, 1970.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “A SZOT Titkárság állásfoglalása a nőpolitikai határozat további végrehajtására” [Statement of the SZOT Secretariat on the further execution of the women politics decision], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1971 / 3 doboz / 4 ő.e., October 8, 1971.

⁴⁵ Czerván to Mrs. László Erdei (MNOT), PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1971 / 3 doboz / 4 ő.e., Appendix, n.d.

rial means at hand . . . which can be put to use for this goal.” Secondly, the annual review of the collective agreements had to take these plans into consideration.⁴⁶ Ilona Futó, the doyenne of the politics of women’s work in the VFVDSZ, had already demanded that the ministries should develop and decree the “principles” based on which the grading of women’s and men’s work within the enterprises would be facilitated, so that the proportions between their remuneration would be “just” (*igazságosan megoldani*).⁴⁷

In terms of the overall opportunities for promoting equal pay, the years 1972 and 1973 brought favorable changes. Starting in late 1972, further development of the New Economic Mechanism was delayed. Preference was henceforth given to wage policies in favor of workers in large state sector factories, and new emphasis was placed on central wage policies. This increased the room to act in favor of equal pay at the central level, and central wage regulation did repeatedly take the question of women’s wages into consideration in the following years. By 1973, the government decided on further steps to take. They included “gradual but rapidly paced [*gyorsütemű*]” central and enterprise-level action, and politics aimed at reducing the “justified” differences, especially insofar as they were grounded in women workers’ lack of skill.⁴⁸

In January 1975, a new instrument designed to control wage differentials within industries or professions across the country was introduced. These National Wage Tables for the Professions (*Országos Szakmai Bértáblázat*), under preparation since 1973 with the strong involvement of SZOT and the trade unions, constituted a promising instrument for promoting the struggle against women’s wage discrimination. The instrument was to aim at the “reduction of unjustified differences between base wages” in different parts of the country. It “has to be achieved that across the whole territory of the country, independent of . . . sector, the workers receive nearly identical base wages for work which requires identical education and comes with identical physical hardship and conditions.”⁴⁹ The introduction of the National Wage Tables for the Profes-

⁴⁶ “A SZOT Titkárság állásfoglalása.”

⁴⁷ “Nőfelelősi értekezlet.”

⁴⁸ “Munkügyi Miniszter [Minister of Labor] 761/1980. V/32, Trethon Ferenc s.k.,” PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1980 / 1 doboz / 4 ó.e, July 8, 1980; “Tájékoztató a nők gazdasági és szociális helyzete javítása érdekében hozott határozatokról és rendeletekről” [Information on the decisions and bylaws decreed in the interest of the improvement of the economic and social condition of women], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1978 / 3 doboz / 16 ó.e., ÉDOSZ, n.d., reprinting the Council of Ministers Decision 1004/1973 (December 24).

⁴⁹ MSZMP CC Guidelines for the development of the societal role of the working class and the further improvement of its conditions, 19-20/03/1974, reprinted in Az MSZMP Központi Bizottságának Párttörténeti Intézete (MSZMP PI), ed., *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt határozatai és dokumentumai 1971–1975* [Directives and documents of

sions would effectively raise the wages of women workers who, often as a result of the program of decentralized industrialization, were massed together in the branch-factories of large enterprises established in remote areas.

By the middle of the decade, the commitment of the party, state, and trade unions to pursue equal pay had also made important inroads into other core instruments of Hungarian labor policy. In 1974, the Central Committee combined its declaration that the “labor force of the large enterprises” was the “most solid core” of the working class with the necessity to “deal specifically with the problems of women workers because of their special position and importance within the working class.” This assessment concluded with the observation that it “continues to be a fundamental task to guarantee the principle of equal pay for equal work.”⁵⁰ The 1975 guidelines on the collective agreements to be concluded with reference to the Fifth Five-Year Plan period, jointly issued by the Ministry of Labor and SZOT, prescribed that the agreements had to address equal pay. The precisely defined principle of equal pay had to be pursued “in a more effective manner,” so as to achieve full implementation “throughout the whole enterprise.”⁵¹ Shortly before the open eruption of the macroeconomic and debt crises toward the end of the decade, additional measures were taken, such as raising the lower end of the wage scales and re-regulating shift bonuses. Women workers in particular would profit from these reforms.⁵²

the MSZMP, 1971–1975] (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1978), 672; Decision of the SZOT Presidium on the work on the development of the national wage tables and the statement of the trade unions in this regard, June 25, 1973, reprinted in PTI, *Érdekegyeztetés*, 130–31; *A magyar szakszervezetek XXIII. kongresszusa, 1975. december 8–13. (Rövidített jegyzőkönyv)* [The twenty-third congress of the Hungarian trade unions, December 8–13, 1980; Abbreviated minutes] (n.p.: Táncsics Könyvkiadó, 1976), 414.

⁵⁰ Communication on the MSZMP CC session, March 19–20, 1974, reprinted in MSZMP PI, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, 657, 666. Historian Mark Pittaway describes the focus on the workers of the large state enterprises as a redefinition of the working class, replacing the earlier focus on skilled workers. See Mark Pittaway, *From the Vanguard to the Margins: Workers in Hungary, 1939 to the Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 210.

⁵¹ “A munkaügyi miniszter és a SZOT irányelvei a kollektív szerződések megkötéséről” [Guidelines issued by the Minister of Labor and SZOT on the conclusion of the collective agreements], *Munkaügyi Közlöny*, no. 9 (July 19, 1975): 308. The trade union women claimed that the collective agreements also had to give a share of the wage development funds to be set aside for this purpose, “Tanterv . . . 1976.”

⁵² “Jelentés az MSZMP KB, a kormány, a SZOT és központi vezetőségünk nőpolitikai határozatai végrehajtásának tapasztalatairól” [Report on the experiences with regard to the execution of the directives on women’s politics of the MSZMP CC, the government, SZOT, and our central leadership], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1979 / 1 doboz / 2 ö.e., VFVDSZ, December 1978; Turgonyi and Garai, *Összefoglaló tanulmány*, 45; *A magyar szakszervezetek XXIII. kongresszusa*, 337.

This section has looked at the campaign for equal pay unfolding from 1969 and documented how female trade union functionaries, dedicated to tirelessly promoting equal pay, became a driving force of the campaign. As they built a multilayered policy network for promoting policies in favor of working women, these women accumulated and systematically disseminated expert knowledge on (un)equal pay. They pursued an inclusive and sophisticated policy vision, combining various components of how equal pay should be conceptualized and pursued on both enterprise and national levels. Trade union women were involved in generating local successes, and their demands and lobbying most likely contributed to achieving some nationwide pro-equal pay measures.

In the following two sections of this chapter I aim to explain the limited overall success of both the campaign for equal pay and the narrowing of the gender wage gap, as repeatedly documented by both the trade union women's lobby and the Ministry of Labor. The trade union women widely publicized this information as they continued to struggle for equal pay. In the first half of the 1970s, women workers' effective hourly wages in the state sector grew more slowly than the wages of male workers, falling to 70 percent of the latter in 1974, compared to 71.9 percent in 1969. The loss affected all categories of women workers, whether skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled. In terms of the "hourly base wage" (*alapórabér*) there was minimal improvement, with all women workers' wages reaching 73.5 percent of the level of men's in 1974, compared to 73 percent in 1964. Yet the large group of semi-skilled women workers had lost out even in terms of the hourly base wage. In the textile and garment industries there were small gains. In general terms, the data for 1979 again showed slight deterioration.⁵³

In Hungary, as in other countries, a vested interest in continued wage discrimination against female workers remained, pursued by various actors and rooted in numerous motivations. Still, the fact that interests and dynamics opposed to equal pay were so dominant in the period between 1969 and 1978 is remarkable, not least because this period, by the end of which the macroeconomic and debt crises became acute, was the heyday of successful standard of living policies in Hungary. These policies largely ignored

⁵³ Júlia Turgonyi, *Az iparban foglalkoztatott nők foglalkozási-, szakmai struktúrája, és a szakszervezetek feladatai (Zárótanulmány)* [The employment and professional structure of the women employed in industry, and the tasks of the trade unions: Concluding study] (Budapest: Szakszervezetek Elméleti Kutató Intézete, 1981), 98–101, 103, 108–9. A report by the Ministry of Labor issued in 1980 stated that the overall average income of women was 30 percent lower than that of men in 1979, as compared to 35 percent in 1970. Women's base wages in identical work were 10 percent lower than men's, yet the difference was bigger when the fulfillment of norms and the piece rate-based component of the wages was taken into account. "Munkaügyi Miniszter [Minister of Labor] 761/1980."

the consequences of the world economic crisis triggered in 1973, including a dramatic deterioration in Hungary’s terms of trade, and other macroeconomic problems and restrictions connected to the continued industrialization drive that now relied more heavily on easily-procured Western loans than it had in the 1960s. Only at the end of 1978 was the MSZMP’s general secretary, the head of state János Kádár, forced to acquiesce to demands to freeze the standard of living for an indefinite period of time in order to restore macroeconomic equilibrium.⁵⁴ The period between 1970 and 1975 saw the highest increases in real wages according to Hungarian national statistics. In the second half of the 1970s real wages rose at a slower pace, before they stagnated and ultimately declined in the 1980s.⁵⁵

The 1970s thus entailed—in the abstract—high potential for any campaign for equal pay, sustained by dedicated actors, to yield visible success. However, as will be shown in the following section, dominant framings of the politics of women’s work—which many trade union women willingly embraced—and a number of characteristics of the creation of wage policies in state-socialist Hungary kept the door open for vested interests to continue wage discrimination against female workers, even before 1978.

The Co-Construction of Restrictive Framings of the Politics of Women’s Work

The agenda of promoting working women’s material interests, which so visibly informed the politics of labor from 1969, was systematically tied to the overall economic advancement of the state-socialist project. Time and again, economic considerations—including references to the perceived necessities of economic planning, and the challenges to and opportunities

⁵⁴ György Földes, *Az eladósodás politikatörténete, 1957–1986* [The political history of indebtedness, 1957–1986] (Budapest: Maecenas Könyvkiadó, 1995), chs. 3, 4, and 5, at 137; Richard Portes, “Hungary: Economic Performance, Policy and Prospects,” in *East European Economies Post-Helsinki: A Compendium of Papers* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 775–77; “Die innenwirtschaftliche Lage Ungarns” [The domestic economic position of Hungary], April 20, 1976, Zwischenarchiv [Intermediate archive], no. 117636, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, Germany; “Wirtschaftsjahresbericht 1975 der Botschaft Budapest” [Annual economic report 1975 of the Budapest Embassy], January 7, 1976, Zwischenarchiv, no. 117636.

⁵⁵ Tibor Valuch, *Magyar hétköznapiak: Fejezetek a mindennapi élet történetéből a második világháborútól az ezredfordulóig* [Hungarian everyday life: Chapters of the history of everyday life from World War II to the turn of the millenium] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2013), 39; Bartha, *Alienating Labour*, 122.

for state-socialist economic development within the (capitalist and state-socialist) world economy—were weighed against female workers’ material interests. Enterprise-level economic considerations—that is, the economic rationality informing the strategies of economic management at the point of production—were also regularly invoked in those cases when measures designed to advance female workers’ material interests were tied to the development and material possibilities of the state-socialist project as a whole.

Those actors who advocated change concurred in principle with the perceived need to take these framings into consideration, so it was easy for others to invoke these framings at any time in order to control and reject specific demands. The fact that the policies of advancing female workers’ material interest were tied into these framings thus genuinely restricted the transformative potential of the campaign for equal pay.

The restrictive potential of the framings was clearly discernible from the very beginnings of the campaign for equal pay. As a consequence of a large-scale inquiry into the condition of working women, in February of that year the government issued a brief decision that simultaneously paved the way for inserting equal pay into the changing construction of workplace-related women’s policies and prefigured the constraints upon real action. The decision referred to the need to enforce the principle of equal pay “in a more consistent manner,” while relating the envisioned progress in the politics of women’s work to a number of defining parameters and constraints. The government declared that the “societal-political [*társadalompolitikai*] importance of further improvement of the condition of women working in factories [*üzem*], in the home and at the workplace, requires that the leadership, in harmony with our economic development, in designing the national economic plans and as part of our standard of living policy, regularly concerns itself with this question at all levels.”⁵⁶

While attributing the highest level of legitimacy to the improvement of the condition of women workers, the decision thus directly tied this element of state-socialist gender policies to the economic advancement of state-socialism, as connected with and expressed in the making of the Five-Year Plans and the evolution of the standard of living policy. In the years to come, this abstract *iunctim* would be repeatedly mobilized in order to legitimate delays in concrete action or justify outright rejection of concrete proposals or demands for change. The trade unions, with their specific

⁵⁶ “A Magyar Forradalmi Munkás-Paraszt Kormány 2003/1969. (II. 15.) számú határozata az üzemi dolgozó nők munkahelyi és otthoni körülményeinek alakulásáról” [Decision no. 2003/1969 (15. 2.) by the Hungarian Revolutionary Workers’ and Peasant’s Government on the development of the conditions at the workplace and at home of women working in factories], *Határozatok tára* 18, no. 2 (1969).

dual role of both “protect[ing] and represent[ing] the interests of working people [*dolgozók*]”⁵⁷ and “partaking in power [*részese a hatalomnak*]”⁵⁸ embodied the *iunctim* in a distinct manner. This dual role translated into a requirement that the trade unions take into consideration the macroeconomic framings of the politics of women’s work. They were—read the MSZMP party program in 1975—“to represent, in accordance with the material possibilities of the country, the interests of their members in terms of the satisfaction of their material, social, and cultural aspirations.”⁵⁹

Accordingly, the trade union women who contributed so much to triggering and sustaining the campaign for equal pay repeatedly emphasized that the gendered change they advocated was not meant to question the economic viability of state socialism, even while arguing that gender injustice, in terms of wages or other factors, was not justifiable under the given economic circumstances either. The 1969 study “The Work and Life Circumstances of the Industrial Women Workers,” authored by Júlia Turgonyi, a leading intellectual representative of women’s trade union politics, and Zsuzsa Ferge, who had spent many years as an employee of the Central Statistical Office, is a case in point. The study was pathbreaking in that it strongly advocated a new politics of women’s work and made the case for the substantive, effective equality of women, including the issue of equal pay. Yet the authors also claimed that progress towards women’s equality could be achieved only in tandem with “economic and general societal” development: “Even . . . if there was the endeavor to fix the obvious errors, our material possibilities would not allow for the radical, swift, and overarching improvement of women’s wages. This can happen only gradually.”⁶⁰ Implying that improving women’s wages was a matter of additional expense, the authors thus indirectly argued that redistributing wage funds in favor of women could not happen at the expense of wage funds already consumed by men. Simultaneously, they also tied the quest for more justice between the women and men of the working classes to the overall development of state socialism.

Trade union women thus acquiesced to gradualism while tirelessly pressing for the hastening of progressive change. From their perspective, only one systemic alternative existed: capitalism, which had long embodied women’s

⁵⁷ As given in the Hungarian Constitution, “Law 1/1972,” *Magyar Közlöny*, no. 32 (April 26, 1972), Art. 4.

⁵⁸ This is how Márton Buza, long-term Director of the Theoretical Research Institute of the Trade Unions (*Szakszervezetek Elméleti Kutató Intézete*), put it in 1985. Márton Buza, *A szakszervezetek Magyarországon* [The trade unions in Hungary] (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1985), 19.

⁵⁹ MSZMP party program 1975, reprinted in MSZMP PI, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, 972.

⁶⁰ Turgonyi and Ferge, *Az ipari munkásnők*, 7–8, 52–53.

wage discrimination, a view exemplified in the pages of *Women of the Whole World* and countless Hungarian publications. An additional explanation for why trade union women acquiesced to gradualism might be found in what gender historian Wang Zheng has recently called the “politics of concealment” pursued by “state feminists” in socialist China between 1949 and 1964. In response to their institutional subordination in the socialist state structure, these women developed strategies of hiding their feminist agenda behind, or embedding it into, declarations of strong support for the official agenda of party and state.⁶¹ Such “politics,” however, would not only enable the pursuit of the campaign for equal pay by tying it explicitly to the stage of development of state socialism, but also enable opponents to keep it at bay via reference to the very framings thus invoked.

The overall framing of the politics of promoting female workers’ material interests, as described here, characterized the campaign against unequal pay in all its phases. The discourse of gradualism was already utilized within SZOT when discussing the first year of experience with the Directive(s) on women’s issues, so as to temper the inappropriate zeal SZOTNB had developed in tackling equal pay. The SZOT division responsible for issues relating to wages and labor, for instance, criticized SZOTNB for presenting “the [components of the Directive(s) on women’s issues] as if they had prescribed, in connection with the various themes [*egy-egy témában*], concrete implementation in 1971, although these [decisions] aimed at continuous progress.” This was particularly true for equal pay. SZOTNB might have “interpreted this point of the government’s decision as if the wage inequalities had to be abolished within one year. Yet nothing of the sort is true! This takes much more time, and can only be the result of gradual, purposeful, persistent work.”⁶² SZOTNB insisted it be formally recorded that the wage “gap has remained wide open, and even become bigger in some places [*olló nyitva maradt, sőt helyenként kitágult*].”⁶³ However, in its role of generating expertise within the trade unions on the struggle for equal pay, SZOTNB itself always made sure to systematically evoke the “larger” framings. The 1976 curricular guidelines for those trade union bodies which organized training courses “for our [SZB] trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues—as the main experts promoting women’s interests in the en-

⁶¹ Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), esp. 16–18.

⁶² Bér-Munkügyi Osztály, “Észrevételek a nőpolitikai határozat végrehajtásával kapcsolatos jelentéshez” [Notes on the report on the implementation of the women-policy decision], SZOT, PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1971 / 3 doboz / 4 ö.e., September 22, 1971.

⁶³ *Tanterv a nőfelelősök tanfolyama számára* (1971); *Tanterv . . . 1976.*”

terprises—made sure to convey that the struggle for equal pay was framed by a number of restrictions and interests which could not be conflated with the quest for women’s equality. In the present period, read the guidelines, “the level of development of the national economy, the size of the national income per capita, or the quantity of the means taken from this income which can be devoted to consumption, influence the wage proportions.” The progress toward equal pay was dependent on other variables, whereas there was no hint whatsoever at any concrete relation between these variables and the possible rhythm of progress toward equal pay. Neither the “larger” variables nor their relation to equal pay were ever translated into concrete figures. Moreover, equal pay was presented as an instrument in the service of foundational goals of state-socialist labor market policies, rather than a goal in itself. The “material appreciation of women’s work” was to serve as an “incentive” to lure some of the few remaining housewives into wage work, and to make women perform appropriately at the workplace.⁶⁴

The politics of equal pay were thus governed by pressure for action, produced throughout the campaign for equal pay via reference to the powerful top-down Directive(s) on women’s issues, on the one hand, and retarded progress, justified via constant reference to the various “larger” discursive and political framings, on the other. Key moments of decision-making duly translated this constellation into ambiguous results, even when large-scale material rewards were distributed to the core working class. The (in)famous Central Committee resolution of November 1972 is a case in point. This decision has been described by a Western observer as a reaction to the “discontents of the urban, blue-collar working class” with some of the outcomes of the New Economic Mechanism;⁶⁵ but up to now scholarship has not asked how the materially marginalized female “mass workers”—recognized in the Directive(s) on women’s issues as a constitutive component of the working class—and the female trade union lobby related to the process. The Central Committee resolution scheduled, on top of the planned general increase in the income of the working population, an 8 percent raise in wages for manual workers in the state industries, which was to be enacted in a “differentiated” manner. This constituted an unprecedented window of opportunity for pursuing a politics of equal pay focusing on industrial women workers. On the one hand, the decision indeed included a clause according to which “the factories which predominantly employ women and work in three shifts have to be treated favorably.”⁶⁶ As a result, enterprises with

⁶⁴ “Tanterv . . . 1976.”

⁶⁵ Portes, “Hungary,” 784.

⁶⁶ Communication about the meeting of MSZMP CC, November 14–15, 1972, reprinted in MSZMP PI, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, 381–82.

a high percentage of workers doing multiple shifts—which included women workers in large proportions—were treated preferentially, and within the industrial sector the special raise was particularly high in the garment industry.⁶⁷ On the other hand, however, “higher qualification, performance, and heavy manual labor” had to be taken into consideration.⁶⁸ By definition, at least two of these criteria worked against reducing the gender wage gap. In particular, the focus on heavy manual labor went squarely against the argument voiced by woman trade unionists and their allies that it was necessary to reevaluate what was considered heavy or burdensome labor.

In order to understand how the politics of (un)equal pay were actually facilitated, we now turn to state-socialist labor policies, the second “larger” framing of the politics of (un)equal pay. If the campaign for equal pay was driven by the Directive(s) on women’s issues and related action, and curbed via reference to the “larger” macroeconomic framings, this tension translated into (re)producing (un)equal pay through characteristic features of state-socialist labor policies.

Doing the Politics of (Un)equal Pay

Key to facilitating state-socialist labor politics was a specific multi-actor arrangement which pervasively characterized wage policies, and the politics of women’s work and labor policies more generally. Under the umbrella of an overall top-down approach, key features of this arrangement were operational in parallel at enterprise, intra-trade union, and national levels. At each of these levels of decision-making, and in between these levels, formal requirements for cooperation with—and the layered rights of—less powerful actors governed how hierarchy was negotiated. For the trade unions this included, depending on subject matter, the right to “consent” (*egyetértés*), and/or “representation of opinion” (*véleményezés*), and/or “monitoring” (*ellenőrzés*). The unions were to represent their opinion on any question touching upon the “life and labor circumstances” of the working population, whenever the MSZMP Central Committee, a branch ministry, or the economic management within the factories prepared and took relevant decisions. Their consent was required whenever the terms of the labor relation of individual workers were set, when the enterprise-level collective agreements were negotiated and concluded, and in relation to other intra-enter-

⁶⁷ “Munkaügyi Miniszter [Minister of labor] 761/1980.” Other sectors treated preferentially were health and education.

⁶⁸ Communication about the meeting of MSZMP CC, November 14–15, 1972, reprinted in MSZMP PI, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, 381–82.

prise matters. Union monitoring included the right to request information from the responsible actors or carry out controls with regard to any subject matter touched upon in legal regulations concerning the working population. From the late 1960s onward, the trade unions also exercised the right of "representation of opinion" in connection with the appointment of economic managers, and they very formally granted the right to veto decisions of the management.⁶⁹

This formal setting generated a pervasive atmosphere and a constant practice of formal and informal bargaining, which kept many actors busy, especially those who actually wanted to achieve tangible results. Sociologist Hertha Kuhrig's description of "women's politics" captures some aspects of this setting for the GDR. Here, strategic decision-making by the party was followed by "practical implementation through a division of labor" in which many actors were involved, and within the framework of which many "female actors [*Akteur:innen*], who devised the reports [*Vorlage*] for the main actors . . . were convinced to do good," not only for socialism but also for women.⁷⁰ In Hungary, the formal setting, involving the trade unions in many capacities, allowed for female trade unionists' relentless action and intervention on behalf of women workers. The same setting, however, generated the intensely mixed record of the campaign for equal pay. At particular moments, such as during the political conjuncture surrounding the 1970 directives on women's issues and their aftermath, it allowed the trade union women's lobby to oblige many actors to commit themselves to setting innovative policy goals regarding working women's equality. To some degree, it also aided the implementation of these goals. Yet the same setting was conducive to the instant translation of adverse interests and circumstances into the factual politics of slowing, and indeed obstructing, progress toward equal pay. Reference to the various restrictive framings discussed above could always be flexibly invoked to justify such a course of action.

State-socialist labor policies, through the operation of these relationships, converted the Directive(s) on women's issues into both weak, partial, or missing implementation, and tireless action by many trade union women. This can be illustrated by countless examples. The last months of 1970 and the beginning of 1971 proved to be a significant juncture in enterprises' wage policies. This was a moment of two beginnings. The enterprises had to

⁶⁹ PTI, *Érdekegyeztetés*, 2–16, 132–37; Judit Lux, *A magyarországi szakszervezetek történetéből: Átdolgozott kiadás* [On the history of the Hungarian trade unions: Revised edition] (Budapest: Friedrich Ebert Alapítvány, 2008), pdf available online, accessed September 5, 2018, <http://polhist.hu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/lux2008.pdf>, 121–22, 129–34.

⁷⁰ Kuhrig, "Mit den Frauen," 217–20.

translate the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1971–1975) into enterprise-level politics, including the preparation and conclusion of the collective agreements. At the same time, in following up on the Directive(s) on women's issues they had to devise their action plans for improving the condition of female employees. The trade union women, acting upon the newly adopted decision, worked fervently toward getting their agenda into the action plans and the collective agreements, along with generating systematic cross references and synergy between these documents.⁷¹ However, within the trade unions the bargaining position of the actors sustaining trade union women's politics, while strengthened by the Directive(s) on women's issues, was formally a weak one. The nascent trade union women's committees, established at all institutional levels, only had advisory status in each of these contexts. Their work was supervised and guided by the regular trade union bodies. Their rights centered on the "representation of opinion," "monitoring," making propositions, and networking. The chairs of the women's committees of the national trade unions had to be secretaries (*titkár*)—that is, functionaries of the given trade union—and the chair of the enterprise-level women's committees had to be a member of the relevant SZB.⁷² The leaders of the women's committees at the various levels considered it a "very important" task to lay their "suggestions" before the responsible main bodies, urged reluctant functionaries to provide the relevant draft materials, and demanded, where formal inclusion had not yet been secured, to be "invited" to all meetings of the relevant bodies so that "at least one person can give her observations [*hozzászól*]."⁷³ The relevant trade union bodies themselves were bound to cooperate with the economic management. The procedure leading up to the adoption of the collective agreement exemplifies the formal elements of this cooperation. The plan prepared by the employer in collaboration with the enterprise-based trade union representation had to be discussed with the workers and thereafter signed by the SZB secretary and the employer.⁷⁴

The early history of the involvement of the emerging trade union women's lobby, with the making of the collective agreements and action plans, illustrates the lived reality of "doing" (un)equal pay within this setting. The

⁷¹ This focus and connection was underlined repeatedly during the first conference of trade union representatives responsible for women's issues in early 1971. For one statement, see Jolán Harsányi, "Nőfelelősi értekezlet."

⁷² For the regulations on the various types of trade union women's committees, see *Dokumentumok*, 62–64, 105, 112; for the committees in the enterprises, see also *Tanterv*, 55.

⁷³ In this case, this person was Comrade Mrs. Krekk, Trade Union of Workers in Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management (*Mezőgazdasági, Erdészeti és Vízügyi Dolgozók Szakszervezete*), talking about the trade union's Secretariat "Nőfelelősi értekezlet"; see also Mrs. Zsigmond Szabó, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Buza and Simó, *Szakszervezeti lexikon*, 281–82, 307.

trade union women were keenly aware that the universal preparation and adoption of the collective agreement was key to the actual promotion of equal pay. “If we are to achieve anything during [our] lifetime [*valamit az életben*] in connection to women’s wages, then this is when the plan for the collective agreement is being discussed.”⁷⁵ The trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues and women’s committees had to be alert and prepared for action at all times in this regard to ensure that they were heard in their advisory capacity. Addressing the first “Conference of Trade Union Representatives Responsible for Women’s Issues” (*Nőfelelősi értekezlet*), SZOTNB president Margit Czerván exhorted that the SZBs “shall not give their opinion on the collective agreements unless the women’s committee has made its suggestions.”⁷⁶ Reporting the complaint of one local trade union representative responsible for women’s issues from her trade union, Mrs. Futó reflected on the precarious position of the trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues for the local politics of women’s work more generally. “One comrade . . . put it this way: how can she assert the attainment of the [Directive(s) on women’s issues] if there are men at every level, and the leadership and fate of the decision’s implementation is in their hands, and . . . [the women’s] work in this regard can [only] be subsidiary.”⁷⁷ The trade union women also worked hard to get the enterprises to seriously “put on the table” within the action plans “what they want to do in the interest of women” rather than simply trying to “copy the [central] decision” or sketching out “the tasks only roughly.”⁷⁸ At the first conference of trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues, SZOT functionary and SZOTNB staff member Erzsébet Déri nonetheless cautioned against exaggerated expectations. The connection between the action plans and the collective agreements was nonbinding, and therefore much depended on trade union women’s activity. In her conclusion as given in the conference minutes, Mrs. Déri stated: “It is a good thing that we shall get [the responsible actors] to work the key points of the action plans into the collective agreements. Of course, not everything is possible, only that which can be regulated. . . . We ask you to send us good examples of the enterprises’ action plans.”⁷⁹ These could be used to apply pressure or help willing enterprises to come up with good action plans.

⁷⁵ Statement by Comrade Mrs. Németh, trade union representative responsible for women’s issues of the Pest County SZMT, “Nőfelelősi értekezlet.”

⁷⁶ Mrs. Czerván, “Nőfelelősi értekezlet.”

⁷⁷ Such harsh words were extremely rare. “Nőfelelősi értekezlet.”

⁷⁸ Comrade Mrs. Gerstenbrand, Trade Union of Workers in Traffic and Transport (*Közlekedési és Szállítási Dolgozók Szakszervezete*), “Nőfelelősi értekezlet.”

⁷⁹ Jolán Harsányi, BDSZ, “Nőfelelősi értekezlet.”

These struggles and interactions paint a vivid picture of the many ways in which the politics of women's work could be, and indeed were, conducted within the enterprises. Early on, SZOTNB summarized one of the difficulties of the new politics of women's work. "The guarantee and control of genuinely performance-based remuneration, and consistent action against unjustified differences, are the weak point of the guiding work of the economic leadership, the activity of the trade unions, and the exercise of the union stewards' right of consent."⁸⁰

The trade union women expended a great deal of energy in negotiating these difficulties and the multiple, malleable, and firm institutional frameworks of state-socialist labor policies on the ground. These women knew or experienced that they had gained no more than the capacity to negotiate and to try to exert pressure on other actors. In addition, even activists or functionaries who were openly critical of the resistance they experienced at every turn concurrently failed to engage critically with the overall arrangement of state-socialist labor policies, and only rarely criticized or reflected upon the status of their own politics of women's work within this arrangement. The trade union women geared up for many years of struggle and unremitting activity, an attitude which was in line with their acceptance of the "larger," potentially restrictive framings described above. As they acquiesced in the given conditions they developed a strong focus on the "subjective factor." This approach, always mindful of the fact that the new politics of women's work had to be initially facilitated by means of negotiation and pressure, consisted of three components. Firstly, the trade union women time and again underlined the importance of goodwill, especially from the more powerful actors, and their readiness to cooperate. "If a leadership [here meaning the economic management of an enterprise or factory] is mindful of the signals of the women's committee, then the execution of the directive [on women's issues] will be effective."⁸¹ This implied, secondly, that the "attitude" (*hozzáállás*)⁸² or "approach" (*szemlélet*)⁸³ of these actors was decisive, and therefore that time and energy spent on influencing and convincing all those actors who

⁸⁰ "Jelentés a SZOT Elnökségének a Nőhatározat végrehajtásának tapasztalatairól és a további tennivalókról" [Report to the SZOT Presidium on the experiences of the execution of the Directive(s) on women's issues and on further tasks], SZOTNB, PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1980 / 1 doboz / 8 ö.e., April 25, 1980.

⁸¹ Statement by Mrs. Déri, "Jegyzőkönyv ... az SZMT [NB] alakuló üléséről" [Minutes of the opening meeting of the SZMT NB], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1971 / 2 doboz / 7 ö.e., December 11, 1970, Tolna county.

⁸² "Jelentés a bányászati iparágakban foglalkozott nődolgozók helyzetének ... javítása érdekében" [Report on the ... improvement of the position of women employed in the mining industries], PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1971 / 3 doboz / 4 ö.e., June 8, 1971.

⁸³ "A SZOT Titkárság állásfoglalása."

had more power—from the ministry, through the economic management of the enterprise, to the fellow trade union functionary—to support the new politics of women’s work was never wasted. Thirdly, in exploiting the top-down structure of state-socialist labor policies with ultimate decision-making concentrated in the hands of upper-level actors, connections to these actors could be mobilized to overcome difficulties on the ground and achieve larger goals. At the first Conference of trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues in 1971, one comrade Ács, who represented the Trade Union of Workers of the Building, Wood, and Construction Materials Industries (ÉFÉDSZ) powerfully described (while being repeatedly interrupted by Mrs. Déri) some of the relevant efforts and experiences:

Comrade Ács: . . . [W]e managed to ensure that the director general of the Glass Industry Works prepared the action plan on the basis of negotiation with the [responsible trade union body]. . . . In my opinion, if we can ensure that the economic units prepare the action plans, then there will be big results. Government decision—whether or not the ministry decrees [its own] action plan—is mandatory.

Mrs. Déri: In essence it was the trade union, which extorted [*kierőszakol*] the whole action plan.

Comrade Ács: . . . The SZOT Secretariat shall excoriate [*elmarasztal*] those [national] trade unions which insufficiently urged the ministry to issue the [branch level] action plan. Our general secretary [*főtitkár*; i.e., the executive leader of ÉFÉDSZ] went to see the minister five times without result, until in the end he went to see Comrade Somoskői [Gábor Somoskői, SZOT secretary and high-ranking MSZMP functionary] and asked him for help in this regard. . . . In preparation for the action plans one had to wield large-scale influence on the trade union bodies too. They put in writing that in their realm there is no problem, but in the end, they note that women’s wages need to rise by 30 percent within five years . . .⁸⁴

Irén Martos, who from 1980 to 1989 was general secretary of the Trade Union of Workers in the Textile Industry (*Textilipari Dolgozók Szakszervezete*), remembered in an interview given in 2016 that

things had to be broached every day. Now, when Juli Nyitrai [the chair of SZOTNB from 1977] will be here [for a previously scheduled interview], she can then, I think, relate a good many practical examples. . . . But

⁸⁴ “Nőfelelősi értekezlet.” In the translation of this statement I have tried to capture the somewhat abbreviated style of the minutes.

on every level . . . how shall I say, there was a need for the interest-representation of women, . . . down in the factory on the factory level, then in the industry on the level of each industry, then likewise on the level of the [SZOT], in other words, everywhere [one had to remind] the partners that these things may not be neglected, and this had to be brought up day by day.⁸⁵

Of key relevance for the fortunes of state-socialist labor policies in Hungary was the particular combination of a strong discursive commitment with rather weak legal commitments and overtly weak implementation mechanisms. The “mass organizations,” including with regard to many questions the trade unions, were put into a position to negotiate and exert pressure, and the status of the trade union women responsible for the politics of women’s work within this setting was particularly weak. These general features of labor policy, as well as the constant invocation of the restrictive larger framings discussed above, left a strong mark on the politics of women’s work and trade union women’s engagement with these politics. As a result of their complex (self-)positioning, female Hungarian trade unionists had a difficult time squarely confronting the ambiguity of other actors, or their opponents’ outright denial of change. It is hard to guess how individual protagonists of the equal pay campaign, in their “inner image,” connected with this ambiguous constellation. For those amongst them who, while committed to the (self-described) socialist state or its trade unions, felt deeply about gendered wage injustice, indefatigable effort and initiative in the face of limited results was certainly one *modus operandi*. The structure and practices of state-socialist labor policy discussed in this section were conducive to such an approach. Many trade union women certainly understood themselves, as SZOTNB president Margit Czerván put it, as engaged in constant struggle to transform the new politics of women’s work from “a written gift” into “a lived reality” (*hogy ne trott ajándék, hanem valóráváltott gyakorlat legyen*).⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Irén Martos, Interview, audio recording and transcript, January 26, 2016, transcript p. 8.

⁸⁶ Czerván used this formula when summarizing the debates of the first conference of trade union representatives responsible for women’s issues in January 1971. “Nőfelelősi értekezlet.”

Women Workers’ Wages and the State-Socialist Project in Perspective

The appeal for joint action toward the enforcement of women’s rights, adopted by the World Congress of Women convened by the WIDF in Helsinki in June 1969, resolved the unacknowledged problem of how to address, from an international communist-led platform, the existence of unequal pay in state-socialist countries—where the phenomenon by definition could not exist. In her report on working women presented to the congress, the Soviet delegate Valentina Nikolayevna Tereshkova had once again asserted that in the socialist countries the “principle of equal pay is guaranteed . . . and put into effect.”⁸⁷ The appeal for joint action, by contrast, employed an open-ended formula, demanding the “general application of the principle of equal pay for equal work.”⁸⁸ Back in Hungary, only a few weeks earlier in May 1969, SZOT had invented the formula (quoted in the introduction to this chapter) which defined the “effective implementation” of the principle of equal pay as the key political task. This formula would guide the equal pay campaign unfolding in Hungary for years to come.

The history of the campaign, which had been triggered and in many senses was continued by trade union pressure and in particular by female trade unionists—whilst also being fully endorsed by party and state—helps to develop a deeper understanding of some elements of the history of labor under state socialism. Wage policies in Hungary in the 1970s evolved within the double framework of the reemergence of a politics of “privileging” the industrial working class as the New Economic Mechanism was curtailed from late 1972 onwards, and the politics of a cornucopia in terms of wage development in general, and for the industrial labor force in particular. The regime fully acknowledged that women workers formed a backbone of the industrial working class, and that the few remaining, desperately needed labor reserves were comprised of women in the first place.

This conjuncture was conducive to the politics of promoting equal pay for industrial women workers. These mostly semi-skilled or unskilled women workers were strongly represented in the growing group of the often harshly exploited “mass workers” in industry. As a result of wage differentials between branches and differentially located production units, and vari-

⁸⁷ *Women of the Whole World*, no. 3 (1969).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

ous more directly gendered biases in wage setting, women suffered from systematic wage discrimination when compared to male workers belonging to the same group.⁸⁹ In addition, female workers—at least in Hungary—felt strongly about, and repeatedly gave voice to, their anger about gendered wage injustice. Turgonyi and Ferge, who had interviewed 260 women workers in six factories for their 1969 study, claimed that gendered wage discrimination had “elicited the most negative reverberations” from the women workers.⁹⁰ When interviewed more than a decade later, Ferenc Zavori, head of the Organization and Cadre Division of a remote northeastern county SZMT, gave a mixed account of progress with regard to equal pay, and gendered wage issues more generally. In his county, Zavori stated, “[t]he leaders and union stewards are satisfied, but the women are impatient with regard to this theme.”⁹¹

Neither the particular conjuncture in terms of wage policies in the 1970s nor women workers’ openly articulated discontent with wage inequality proved conducive to generating a breakthrough. This was so with regard to both special wage promotion for the “mass workers”—including the women—within the industrial workforce as a whole, and the women within the group of the “mass workers.” From the analysis given in this chapter of how this happened, two conclusions can be drawn with regard to wage policies and the politics of women’s work more generally. Firstly, state-socialist wage policies treated industrial “mass workers” in a markedly instrumental manner, subordinating their condition to the goal of economic development even at those moments when—at least according to the perception of many contemporaneous actors—they could have done otherwise. The persistence of the politics of gendered unequal pay discussed in this chapter, as well as the abortive attempt to abolish women’s night work

⁸⁹ The parallel and overlapping wage discrimination of (the much smaller overall group of) male and female workers belonging to the Roma population needs to be investigated. In the first half of the 1970s, amongst the working household heads belonging to the Roma population, 55 percent were unskilled workers. While the activity rate of working age Roms was nearly as high as amongst non-Roms (85 and 88 percent respectively), the Romnja activity rate was low (30 percent as compared to 64 percent of the non-Romnja). As was the case with regard to working women at the time, the low skill level was considered a key reason for the low wages of the working Roma population. Nonetheless, as one author added, “presumably the prejudices against the Gypsies” also played a role. Mrs. István Kozák, “Az életszínvonal és a foglalkoztatottság összefüggése a cigánylakosságnál” [The correlation between standard of living and employment among the Gypsy population], *Munkaügyi Szemle*, no. 11 (1975): 23–28.

⁹⁰ Turgonyi and Ferge, *Az ipari munkásnők*, 5, 51–52.

⁹¹ The interview formed part of a long series of interviews, most of which were conducted in 1982, and some, possibly, in 1979. Interview with Ferenc Zavori, conducted by Mrs. István Benkő, PIL, SZKL 2. f. 19 / 1983 / 1 doboz / 5 ő.e.

that formed a parallel element of the new politics of women’s work in the 1970s,⁹² substantiate this claim. The fact that the state-socialist regimes on the factory floor treated labor in a highly instrumental manner is common knowledge amongst historians of state socialism. Concentrating on the campaign for equal pay through a focus on the gendered composition of the large group of the “mass workers” helps capture an important element of the classed and gendered differentiation of this instrumental approach.

Secondly, state-socialist wage policies built on an inherited, and were co-shaped and sustained, by an ongoing foundational male bias, which persisted despite all the activities, decrees, and measures addressing the issue of unequal pay. In other words, there was not one unified working class under Hungarian state socialism, but a fundamentally gendered working class. The women who formed part of this class were systematically materially discriminated against in terms of wages, and in a broader sense held a secondary working-class citizenship.

The politics of equal pay as pursued and advocated in state-socialist Hungary during the 1970s and beyond, and possibly the gendered politics of the workplace more generally, offer a second set of insights. There was never any visible rupture with the declared goal to pursue the “effective implementation” of the principle of equal pay. Still, when compared to the parallel policies of easing the burden which the labors of social reproduction placed on working women, the campaign for equal pay produced fewer results. Historian Małgorzata Mazurek has claimed that women workers in Łódź, rather than challenging gendered wage injustice, “saw the industrial plant as the extension of work for the household” and used the factory as a venue through which to pursue their interests related to social reproduction.⁹³ Donna Harsch has argued that the rapid advance of new social reproduction poli-

⁹² This is the second focus of my study on trade unions and the politics of women’s work in Hungary from the 1960s to the 1980s. The 1970 Directive(s) on women’s issues addressed four major policy areas: equal pay, night work, measures aimed at easing the burden of social reproduction, and professional training for women. The commitment to abolish the night shift for women workers was flimsier than the commitment to equal pay from the beginning, and further weakened a few months after the various directives on women’s issues were adopted. Against the background of the macroeconomic crisis and intensifying export orientation, in 1977 Hungary abrogated the ILO Night Work (Women) Convention (Revised) (No. 41), to which the country had been party since 1936. The parallel analysis of the policies of women’s night work demonstrates how the politics of women’s work were driven by considerations directly related to both domestic and international factors impacting on the Hungarian economy.

⁹³ Małgorzata Mazurek, “From Welfare State to Self-Welfare: Everyday Opposition among Female Textile Workers in Łódź, 1971–81,” in *Gender Politics and Mass Dictatorship: Global Perspectives*, ed. Jie-Hyun Lim and Karen Petrone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 289.

cies in the GDR reflected the enhanced opportunities for working women to successfully pursue their related interests—if only in the form of “atomized individual strategies”—against the backdrop of the economy’s increasing dependency on the female workforce.⁹⁴ In Hungary, women workers repeatedly articulated their resentment of unequal pay, and many trade union women involved in the politics of women’s work devoted keen attention to wage injustice, sustaining a full-scale campaign for equal pay.

Situating these findings in the larger context of the state-socialist politics of women’s paid and unpaid work, I draw two conclusions. Firstly, in light of the fairly limited successes of the enduring campaign for equal pay, it can be argued, at least with regard to Hungary, that women workers’ capacity to pursue their interests for remuneration at the point of production was weaker not only in comparison to their male peers, but also in comparison to how their needs and interests influenced the politics of social reproduction. There was one difference between the question of equal pay and the question of social reproduction that was crucial from the perspective of this chapter. While investment in social reproduction certainly stabilized the larger gender order as it helped women to cope with the “double burden”—often labeled the “second shift” in Hungary at the time—the politics of equal pay could be, and indeed often were, perceived as generating or enhancing direct competition between male and female workers, and destabilizing material groundings of male hegemony at the point of production. Secondly, it could be argued that the instrumental treatment of the labor force that characterized the state-socialist politics of labor found a particularly pronounced expression in the gendered politics of the workplace. This finding complements those studies which suggest that male skilled workers enjoyed considerable bargaining power in state-socialist societies,⁹⁵ and can serve as a springboard to develop a fuller picture of the relationship between state-socialist regimes and the labor force.

The scholarly debate on this relationship has long focused “primarily not on the state but on the workers.”⁹⁶ Foregrounding the trade unions and the trade union women invested in promoting working women’s in-

⁹⁴ With reference to earlier decades, Harsch argues that women were interested in wage questions and that demands for equal pay were deemed legitimate, whereas low wages in general couldn’t be challenged. Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, 102–3, 312.

⁹⁵ Alf Lüdtke, “The World of Men’s Work, East and West,” in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, ed. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 234–49; Pittaway, *From the Vanguard*.

⁹⁶ Tuong Vu, “Workers under Communism: Romance and Reality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, online edition, 2013), accessed July 15, 2015, DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199602056.013.027.

terest within the (self-described) socialist state does not merely contribute to developing a more nuanced understanding of how the state-socialist regime engaged with workers. It also offers a way to “think together” about labor history and women’s history through a final set of conclusions referring to trade union women’s engagement with the politics of women’s work. The trade unions, and above all the female trade unionists and their allies, while certainly invested in the instrumentalist approach to the labor force, pursued the new gendered politics of promoting women’s interests at the workplace. Ordinary working women were drawn or pushed into the trade union institutions and functions installed for the purpose (generating pronounced upward mobility in some cases). The network of female trade unionists played a key role in generating, sustaining, and driving forward the campaign for equal pay. The women-centered politics of the workplace these actors pursued were characterized by a number of features particular to the state-socialist gender regime at the time, and by features that speak to larger contexts of the politics of gender and labor in the twentieth century. Firstly, women were the single most important driving force of the politics directed against unequal pay, a key element of material gendered injustice. In other words, it was women who championed women’s core interests against reluctant men and male-dominated institutions. This finding squarely situates both the gender regime and women’s commitment to pro-women policies in 1970s state-socialist Hungary within a larger common history of women’s movements and activisms around the world. Scholars have only just begun to consider within a common frame the activism of women dedicated to various pro-women agendas in divergent political systems and international contexts within the evolving gender politics of the twentieth century.⁹⁷ Secondly, in one sense, the Hungarian female trade unionists pursued their pro-women policies from a comparatively strong “outsider-within” position. Key trade union institutions dedicated to the politics of women’s work with a focus on the workplace operated in an advisory capacity alone. In addition, trade union women dedicated to pursuing women’s interests (as defined at the time) could exert influence on those committees and institutions which were ultimately responsible for the “real” decisions only to a limited degree. This finding situates the history of these women in the larger context of the pervasively masculinist traditions of the labor movement, while also underscoring the masculinist character of the Hungarian state in the period of state-socialism which built on these tradi-

⁹⁷ Celia Donert, “Women’s Rights in Cold War Europe: Disentangling Feminist Histories,” *Past and Present* 218, Supplement 8 (2013): 178–202; Francisca de Haan et al., eds., *Women’s Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); Zheng, *Finding Women in the State*.

tions. Thirdly, in another sense, female Hungarian trade unionists were invested more than laboring women in other contexts within a system of layered top-down power over the female workforce they claimed to represent. They identified, if only for the perceived lack of better alternatives, with the base structure of this system. As a result, while many of them were, in all certainty, genuinely committed to the agenda of promoting women workers' interests, they would never challenge the foundational framings and mechanisms of state-socialist labor policies which were conducive to pursuing working women's interests in a limited manner at best. Trade union women would thus confidently engage in or resign themselves to persevering—in many cases through decades—in pursuing their goals within the given hierarchical multi-actor arrangement of state-socialist labor policies, whatever results they might or might not achieve. In this way they visibly contributed to the women-friendly substance and appearance of the state-socialist system, while simultaneously cooperating—some from a position of “soft power” and many from clearly subordinate locations—with a system of labor policies that continuously produced and reproduced the material injustice weighing so heavily on women workers.