



CHAPTER 1

Orbánistan and the Anti-gender Rhetoric in Hungary

Abstract This chapter introduces Hungary’s anti-liberal political rule and its gender regime. It traces policy changes in Hungary since 2010, discusses the legacies of the state socialist gender regimes and the formation of a new, anti-liberal one. I introduce the term “carefare” and discuss how the concept of “gender” has been deployed by Hungarian politicians to legitimate an increase in women’s unpaid care burden and their lack of attention to gender inequality in the labor market. I end the chapter with a description of my research methods and provide an outline for the rest of the book.

Keywords Illiberalism • Anti-liberalism • Post-state socialism • Gender regime • Hungary • Anti-gender rhetoric

Hungary is proof positive that history did not end, as Francis Fukuyama famously predicted, after the collapse of the state socialist regimes in the early 1990s. Within 20 years, the country became the poster child of democratic backsliding, right-wing populism and anti-liberal authoritarian rule, all combined with a capitalist economy whose operation oscillates between global neoliberal and eastward-looking neo-patrimonial principles. This novel form of governance is closely intertwined with a novel type of state gender regime—a combination of old and new elements in an

exorbitantly patriarchal mix—which I call “carefare”. This book describes the concept of carefare and its real-life manifestation in anti-liberal Hungary. Admittedly my argument is about a single country, but since elements of anti-liberal governance are gaining ground every day, the lessons here should serve as potential for comparison elsewhere.

“There is no such thing as gender!” claimed a high-level Hungarian politician in response to critiques of the government’s ban on masters’ degrees in Gender Studies in 2018. And in denial, the term “gender” has been spread far and wide. After its landslide victory in 2010, one of the first pieces of legislation Viktor Orbán’s government introduced ended the requirement to eliminate gender stereotypes in the national curriculum of kindergartens. Soon the government moved from kindergarteners to a wide range of other social groups. The Parliament refused to ratify the “Istanbul Convention”¹ by claiming offense at the word “gender” in the document, enshrined the requirement that families consist of a biological male and a biological female, passed numerous pieces of legislation which reformulated, restricted and rigidified the social roles assigned to women and men, threatened women’s reproductive rights, prohibited the option of sex change, as well as adoption by unmarried or non-heterosexual individuals. Members of the government have lobbied aggressively for the elimination of the term “gender” along with the concept of gender equality from policy proposals of international organizations. The government stopped funding NGOs which addressed gender equality problems and put an end to all government agencies that designed, implemented and monitored legislation to promote women. Through policies like these, accompanied by unabating government-inspired media propaganda, an anti-liberal gender regime has been constructed. Although this gender regime has its roots in the lengthy history of Hungary’s varied past political orders, and carries some elements of both institutionalized gender relations in Western neoliberal democracies and the Central European state socialist gender regimes of the recent past, it is also distinctly different from both.

Institutionalized patterns of gender relations or “gender regimes” are shaped by and themselves are constituent parts of political-economic governance (Connell 1987; Walby 2020). The literature on the

¹The “Istanbul Convention” or more precisely the “Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence” came into force in 2014. It was signed but not ratified by Hungary.

transformation of gender relations in anti-liberal regimes, especially in Hungary and Poland, has primarily focused on the ways in which the term “gender” has been used to create political mobilization and legitimacy, build internal loyalty and gather votes (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kováts 2020; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018). In this book I want to highlight different aspects of the newly emerging state gender regime: the transformation of women into carefare workers and the gender regime’s—potential or real—impact not only on gender but also on class inequalities.

Since 2010 the Hungarian government instituted policies and policy practice which offer a novel response to the “crisis of care” problem (Fraser 2016). In anti-liberal Hungary, care work is not commodified, instead it is sentimentalized in a specifically gendered way. It is not outsourced to poorly paid immigrant laborers, or widely available for purchase on the market from for-profit providers. It is also not offered—in sufficient quantity or quality—at a more moderate cost in institutions of care maintained by the state or by community-based non-governmental organizations. Instead, anti-liberal Hungary has been aggressively promoting the intensification of women’s domestic care load through its all-encompassing pronatalism which ties social citizenship rights to having children, yet offers highly selective state support for the long-term work of caring for small children, even less for other forms of care. Simultaneously, women’s paid work is required to maintain the family’s subsistence (and often their access to state subsidies for children) but labor market gender *inequality* is openly embraced. Most women end up combining an increased volume of unpaid care work with long hours of full-time paid work in an economy that is shamelessly slated against those with care responsibilities. Compliance with such an exacerbated and unequal work burden is elicited through the rejection of gender equality as a principle, the elimination of alternative life courses for women, and a sustained political discourse which sentimentalizes and naturalizes women’s care responsibility. Highlighting the analogies with workfare and prisonfare regimes of neo-liberal capitalist economies (Peck 2001; Wacquant 2010), I call Hungary’s state gender regime variant “carefare”. Carefare, I argue serves as one of the main political, ideological and economic backbones of Hungary’s anti-liberal regime.

HUNGARY SINCE 2010: BUILDING AN ANTI-LIBERAL STATE

Right-wing, antidemocratic, authoritarian-leaning parties and governments have been emerging onto the international political scene in record numbers all over the world, but Hungary's case is one of the starkest. Hungary is the only European country whose democracy has been downgraded by the independent watchdog Freedom House to the category "Transitional or hybrid regime" and the only country classified as only "partly free" within the EU (Freedom House 2021). Political scientists cite extreme party polarization (Enyedi 2016) and emerging populist tendencies (Rupnik 2016) as key enabling factors leading to democratic backsliding. The instability of democratic institutions after 1990, a pre-war tendency toward right-wing conservatism, the weakness of a professional middle class and the lack of a lively civil society will have also contributed to the ease with which Orbán's anti-liberal discourse and political rule gained ground. The economic trauma brought about by the collapse of the state socialist economy, the devastation of the ensuing economic crisis, the quick disillusionment with the unequal rewards of global neoliberal capitalism, which became especially evident during the 2008 economic recession were also important causal factors (Krastev 2016; Scheiring 2015, 2020). In this context, populist and nationalist ideologies promoted by Viktor Orbán and his party, FIDESZ–KDNP² found fertile ground. The alliance won a landslide election victory in 2010 and started the work of building a new form of governance. Borrowing Fareed Zakaria's term (Zakaria 1997), Orbán himself named his rule an "illiberal democracy" in 2014 and later a "Christian Democracy" in 2018.

There is no consensus among political scientists about what aspect of this new form of governance is the most important or the most enduring. Some point to the dominance of a single party (Scheppele 2014), others emphasize its populist features (Enyedi 2016; Müller 2016). Bálint Magyar (2016) describes the regime as a "mafia state" where systemic corruption serves the interests of the political rulers and their loyalists. Other terminologies, emphasizing yet other features, include "hybrid regime" (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018), "authoritarian capitalism" (Scheiring 2015),

²The full name is FIDESZ—Magyar Polgári Szövetség (FIDESZ—Hungarian Civil Association) in alliance with KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party). The term FIDESZ itself is an abbreviation of the original name of the party until 1995, Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége (Alliance of Young Democrats). I will call the ruling alliance FIDESZ–KDNP from here on.

“neoliberal authoritarianism” (Szalai 2016), “managed illiberal democratic capitalism” (Szelenyi and Csillag 2015) or “national authoritarianism” (Kelemen 2017), to cite just a few. My emphasis when writing about gender relations is on the regime’s radical and explicitly stated rejection of everyday liberal values, of the principle of equal opportunities, of tolerance of difference from a preconceived norm—hence I call it an anti-liberal regime.

While there may not be a consensus about how best to name the regime, there is little doubt about the fact that during its more than a decade (so far) in power, Orbán’s government has profoundly reshaped the principles and practice of political rule in the country: it has centralized and cemented its political power through legislative changes, decreased media freedom, freedom of speech and important forms of academic freedom, it has spent vast amounts of taxpayer’s money on hate-mongering propaganda to serve its political goals and created a regiment of loyal cadres through corruption and cronyism. At the same time, the government has followed many of the prescriptions of neoliberally minded structural adjustment policies: keeping the state deficit low, enforcing state austerity in areas where it would have served the vulnerable, weakening the rights of labor in successful bids to court foreign investors. It has also wasted resources from the European Union’s structural funds and from the economic boom following the 2008 crisis by spending on frivolous investments designed to boost national pride and strengthen Hungarian identity, not to mention the personal wealth of select loyal followers, while neglecting to channel resources into health care, education or social support. It may be worth reviewing these policies in some detail before we proceed to discuss the gender regime built to support and service them.

Upon gaining power the FIDESZ–KDNP government rewrote electoral rules in a way that favored the ruling party (Law CCIII/2011). But the government went well beyond familiar acts of gerrymandering: the new electoral law passed in 2011 cemented its power by making the decision on district boundaries pass as a “cardinal law” which could only be changed by two-thirds of the votes in Parliament. The new legislation turned the elections from a two-level system to a single-round one, and gave voting rights to typically right-leaning ethnic Hungarians living outside the borders of Hungary. These were some of the main actions taken to favor the incumbent party and guarantee its long-term hold on power (Scheppele 2014).

Next, the government produced a new Constitution and the FIDESZ–KDNP dominated Parliament hastily passed it without much consultation or debate. Since the party had a two-third majority they did not need the support of opposition parties, so the procedure could be sped up. This new Constitution started the work of dismantling liberal democracy. It centralized power in the hands of the ruling party, weakened the power of the Constitutional Court and the role of the judiciary. The government made an attempt at replacing judges whom they considered too independent (Bánkuti et al. 2012). In the following decade the European Union (EU) initiated numerous legal procedures against Hungary to enforce the principles of the rule of law, none of which really steered the government off course. Orbán managed to resist even more radical attempts, such as when in 2020 the EU sought to include a clause in its budget that would require that countries abide by the principle of the rule of law in exchange for receiving EU funding. Hungary and Poland vetoed the budget proposal and the pandemic rescue package attached to it, which forced the Union to postpone and soften the measures and allowed Orbán to claim, yet again, “victory over Brussels”.

Numerous other formerly independent institutions, large and small, in areas from finance to culture were gradually drawn under government control. To start, the government revised the media law and the vast majority of mainstream media were sold to government-friendly investors, who promptly steered them into a direction of absolute loyalty to the government. FIDESZ cadres were appointed as editors-in-chief, and journalists were expected to produce stories and accounts which corresponded closely to the message the government wanted to popularize. By 2018, several local media entities were united in a single conglomerate—a pro-government media empire of vast proportions. All national public television and radio channels, practically all regional papers and many internet outlets have essentially become propaganda machines reminiscent of the worst of the state socialist era (ATLO 2020).

Cultural and academic freedoms have similarly been curbed. The government extended its financial and educational control over all state universities—in some cases more radically than in others. The self-governance of academic institutions was eliminated and the decision-making authority of the universities’ Senate was replaced by the rule of government-appointed committees. Other scholarly institutions suffered similar or worse fates: the rights and budgets of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences were significantly reduced and its research institutes were reorganized in a

way that allowed political actors to have a vast influence over the distribution of research funding. The government passed an amendment to the higher education law in 2017 specifically targeting Central European University (CEU)—a US accredited graduate school founded, among others, by George Soros—and proceeded to force it to leave the country. Appeals to the European Union eventually led to a ruling of the European Court of Justice in favor of CEU, but the three years it took the Court to come to this conclusion made the decision moot. More granular-level interference into academic life has been a daily occurrence and incidents are too numerous to list here. One may be mentioned as it is of particular significance for the theme of this book: in 2018, the government unilaterally and without consultation or notice de-accredited gender studies MA degrees in the country.

In addition to the media and educational/research institutions, non-governmental organizations also came to be targeted by government ire: those which worked in areas that did not please the government were simply de-funded. Externally funded international NGOs have been suffering ongoing persecution. To retain a semblance of grassroots action, the government instead initiated and funds generously a loyal circle of “civil” organizations serving the party’s agenda, and has been channeling vast amounts of money to a limited number of handpicked, loyal churches.

Government-appointed loyal cadres manage these institutions in fields as diverse as the economy and financial oversight, through the judiciary, to the cultural field, including managers of theaters, the national library and various museums, too numerous to count. In a fashion painfully reminiscent of the early days of the state socialist era, a new intellectual-professional upper class is in formation, and appointments depend primarily on loyalty rather than actual professional expertise or excellence in the given field. These new cadres then receive a significant income through salaries and kickbacks from government funded projects as well as all the power of their office, as long as they are willing to deliver what the government expects.

Parallel to this is the creation via corruption of a wealthy upper class, a new bourgeoisie, whose economic prosperity depends solely on the amount of money they siphon off government- and EU-funded investments. Some of these assets remain in their own bank accounts, but most find their way back to the coffers of the ruling party. Corruption is extremely widespread and has increased precipitously in recent years in Hungary. This has been noted by practically all international agencies

dealing with the issue (see, e.g., a report by GRECO 2020). The process of informal, illegal channeling of monies to individuals and politically loyal companies is built into the very core of the economic system, from the expectation that physicians get “tipped” in state hospitals to the Hungarian franchise of large software companies which receive kickback from state clients. Even proven obvious cases of corruption go unpursued and unpunished as Hungary’s Attorney General, a loyal party cadre, is extremely reluctant to prosecute them.

Notwithstanding its political populism and anti-liberal tendencies, the Orbán government did not altogether abandon all principles of neoliberal capitalism. FIDESZ–KDNP came to power in 2010 in the midst of the economic crisis and the economic performance of the country was weak in the first few years. By 2013–2014, however, production picked up, as the international economic and financial context improved and European Union structural funds continued to pour in. By the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Hungary’s economic growth outperformed EU averages, employment growth was striking, and real wages increased spectacularly in every year.

Much of this success was based on Hungary’s ability to attract foreign investors (Bandelj 2007) and these investments increased radically after EU membership. Well-known economists have argued that Hungary and other Central and East European countries may be net losers of EU membership, because multinational profit extraction is higher than the gains obtained via EU structural fund payments (Piketty 2018). Other accounts enumerate the various benefits multinational production has brought to the country and which cannot easily be expressed in cash payments (Meszaros 2018). For our purposes it is enough to note that the government’s desire to attract foreign capital is undeniable and courting foreign direct investment has required creating a labor market structure where wages are low and reasonably trained workers are docile. In 2021 Hungary had the second lowest minimum wage in the EU overtaking only Bulgaria in this regard, and recent media accounts claim that over 40% of people do in fact work for the minimum wage, at least as per their formal employment contract. Although average wage levels significantly increased in the late 2010s, they still remain one of the lowest within the EU (Eurostat 2021a). And in recent years, the government has passed several other regulations with the goal of directly pleasing foreign investors and weakening labor rights: compulsory school age was reduced to 16 to feed the unskilled labor requirements of companies, the amount of overtime work an

employer can require was increased by 25% and a great deal of flexibility was guaranteed to employers to compensate for the period, unemployment benefits were cut to almost nothing, the strike laws were changed in a way to make it more difficult for the already weak Hungarian trade unions to organize, work hours were lengthened and vacation time cut in some sectors (Scheiring and Szombati 2019).

Even in times of economic prosperity when wage growth was fairly steep and the state budget flush with money, the government neglected to channel resources into the three key areas which typically would increase the wellbeing of the population in a forward looking manner: health care, public education and social support. These, not coincidentally, are the sectors where female employment is especially high. While tax cuts and income linked benefits guaranteed higher income for the more advantaged, researchers note an ongoing stark state austerity in cash support targeting those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In terms of health care, the glaring shortage of doctors, hospital beds and nursing staff, partly due to the out-migration of trained professionals because of the extremely low salaries and punitive work conditions, became clearly exposed during the coronavirus pandemic. In a period when economic growth leveled at around 4–5% annually Hungary spent less and less of its GDP on its already underfunded health care (Eurostat 2021b). Public education has suffered the same fate: teachers' salaries are exceptionally low, work hours are increasing, educational segregation is officially endorsed and expenditure on education is declining in real value. The consequences are obvious: Hungary is doing poorly in international comparisons in life expectancy and especially healthy life expectancy, as well as in the performance of children in literacy and others skills tests. Hungary meets EU standards in access to childcare for children over three years of age, but is well below the recommended level for younger children. With the support of European Union funding, a small number of new nurseries have been built in the past years and others have been reclassified into this category to boost the numbers in international statistics. Yet the quality of childcare varies: childcare workers receive close to the minimum wage in a lot of nurseries, and access to care is extremely uneven geographically. Parents who live in more prosperous areas may find it easier to get a spot for their child, while parents in rural areas must travel far to find care.

Nowhere is austerity more obvious than in the allocation of social benefits. Unemployment benefits have been drastically cut in length and generosity and the government has sought to replace payment with public

works programs. Social spending to support people in need has been reduced to the bare minimum, especially cash support for the vulnerable (Vastagh 2017). The only policy area where state spending has been boosted is “family protection”, specifically encouragement of and incentives for married working couples to have more children (Rat and Szikra 2018). I will discuss these measures, their logic and consequences in the next chapter.

GENDER REGIMES OF THE PAST

Orbán’s anti-liberal government may be unique in the intensity of its single-minded pronatalism but women’s social citizenship was, arguably, conditioned on their maternity in earlier times as well. In her now classic history of the Hungarian welfare state, Lynne Haney argues that from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s Hungarian women could make successful claims on the state on the basis of motherhood and protested vehemently the shift in emphasis toward material need as the main basis of claims making in the 1990s (Haney 1997, 2002). This is just one, albeit central, feature of the state socialist gender regime which explains the seamlessness of the transition toward anti-liberalism. There are at least three further areas where I see notable continuities between Hungary’s state socialist legacy and our modern-day gender arrangements: women’s historically high participation in gender segregated paid work, their concomitant, unchanged responsibility for care work of both the paid and the unpaid kind, and a general disdain for feminism and independent civil organizations fighting for women’s rights.

First, a word on the concept of “gender regime” is in order. A gender regime is constituted by “patterns of gender arrangements”(Connell 1987), which describe how members of a society are classified into groups designated as men and women, the distinct social roles and responsibilities assigned to each, their symbolic representations, along with the inequalities built into these structures. All our social institutions are built on assumptions about and practices of gender: from the production process to reproduction, sexuality, institutions of politics and power, as well as emotions and cultural expressions. While gender may be manifested somewhat differently in each of these institutional arrangements, institutional gender regimes are deeply connected and in Connell’s terminology cohere into a societal level “gender order”, or following Walby’s terminology, a new form of patriarchy or “gender regime” (Walby 2020).

State socialist countries developed new patterns of gender arrangements after World War II under the leadership and supervision of the Soviet Union. At the time when, after the devastation of the war, Western European countries reveled in an increase in their birth rates and celebrated the stay-at-home housewife, women of all social classes were required to join the paid labor market in Hungary and in the other Central and East European states ruled by newly instituted communist parties. Women's paid work was understood as essential for women's emancipation according to the Marxist–Leninist doctrine. Not coincidentally, women's contributions was also sorely needed in the intensive industrialization project Central and Eastern European countries embarked upon after the destruction caused by World War II. Women's potential had been a vastly underutilized resource (Csányi 2019; Zimmermann 2010). The main goal of early women's emancipation policies was to cajole, and occasionally to force women to take up paid work. After World War II, about a third of all women had been working for wages in Hungary (Gyáni 1987) but by the end of the state socialist era this percentage climbed to over 75%. Similar rates were recorded in Nordic countries but, unlike there, in Hungary women worked full time all through their adult lives (Fodor 2021). Although employment levels plummeted after the collapse of state socialism and the attraction of the image of the middle-class stay-at-home housewife featured prominently in the imagination of many over-worked Hungarians, material reality only really allowed the very few at the top of the social hierarchy to drop out of work voluntarily. Women's full-time labor force participation in Hungary has varied but remained high overall for the past 70 years, indeed higher than in most EU countries when expressed in full-time equivalency rates (OECD 2019).

Inequalities at work were, however, rampant all through the state socialist period. Although data from the period are notoriously unreliable, researchers have found higher levels of occupational segregation in state socialist countries than in comparable capitalist ones during this period (Rosenfeld and Trappe 2002). In Hungary too, two-thirds of workers in sectors such as clothing or food production were women, and these jobs paid less than work in other sectors of the economy, which resulted in a wage gap that was measured at around 30% during the late state socialist era (Zimmermann 2010). This may have been somewhat compensated by the vast array of benefits in kind that workers received directly from the company they worked for, including kindergarten places, medical services, vacation home rentals and so on. Perhaps more importantly,

housing—rented at a nominal cost from the state for life—was at least partly allocated by employers, and families with children as well as single parents enjoyed some privileges (Scheiring 2020). In the case of a divorce, mothers were typically granted full custody over children and, as a consequence, they also usually retained the right to the apartment. With a high divorce rate this led to difficult life circumstances and/or increased homelessness for men, as well as some financial advantage for women.

Similarly on the positive side, women's education attainment increased noticeably under state socialism and this, along with their growing work experience, led to their more equal share in positions of mid-level authority. Compared to neighboring Austria, which had started with a roughly similar gender regime after World War II but followed an altogether different route afterwards, women's labor market advancement in state socialist Hungary was significant (Fodor 2003).

The need for women's paid work has a long history in Hungary, as does the unequal division of household labor. Communist parties proclaimed their intention to socialize child and elderly care as well as domestic work. After World War II kindergartens were opened, children and adults were offered subsidized meals in school and factory canteens, laundry facilities were available at a low cost in larger cities and so on. None of these proved sufficient, however, to ease women's reproductive burden to any significant degree, especially not in the context of a general shortage of services and goods required for the maintenance of a household. Women, as time budget surveys and ethnographic accounts attest, worked long hours in their paid jobs followed by a lengthy second shift at home (Ghodsee 2005).

Some of the burden of reproductive work was alleviated by shared households. The proportion of multigenerational living arrangements was always higher in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe and remained so, partly because housing shortages had affected the whole state socialist period. But mobility from the countryside to the cities also increased, and mobile families could not draw on the contribution of older generations in care work. It is thus not surprising that the birth rate, high after World War II, started to drop precipitously soon afterwards, and by 1959 Hungary's total fertility rate dipped below what would have been required to keep population levels stable. Partly in response to these problems and partly because intensive industrialization slowed by the mid-1960s, the logic of the communist party's women's emancipation policy shifted and even more of the care burden was moved to the realm of the family and onto the shoulders of women. Lengthy, paid maternity

leave opportunities were instituted in almost all countries in the region in the mid-1960s. In Hungary, new mothers (and mothers only) could withdraw from paid work for up to three years upon childbirth and were guaranteed their jobs back upon return. Kindergarten places for children over three years of age as well as other social services related to childrearing became increasingly available and a balance was struck: it remained primarily women's responsibility to take care of children without much support from individual men but with some, typically in-kind, contributions from the state. In exchange, women continued to be employed as full-time workers. However, working for wages in the socialist economy proved significantly less demanding than in its capitalist counterpart: work hours were shorter, overtime less frequent and the expectation of work intensity varied. "We pretend to work, they [the state] pretend to pay us" was the popular joke of the time and women's account of their work day often included doing the shopping in local shops or in the facilities within their work enterprises. Indeed, given the vast labor shortage and the political guarantee of a paid job for everyone, except for smaller pockets of the population, among them, for example, the Roma minority in Hungary, people could fairly easily find a new job if they found that the conditions in a specific factory or office were incompatible with their domestic responsibilities.

Nevertheless, women worked significantly longer hours than men overall. To illustrate, a time budget survey taken in 1986 shows that among married couples with two children women spent 63 minutes a day on childcare and 227 minutes on domestic work for a total of 290 minutes. Fathers of two, on the other hand, dedicated only 61 minutes to these two types of activities combined. This 229-minute (almost 3.5 hours!) gap is not compensated for by the fact that men spent on average two more hours on doing paid work than women. Overall married mothers of two children had significantly less leisure time than similar men and a very long—almost ten-hour-workday altogether (KSH 2012). State socialist policies, except for a few initial steps in the early 1950s, mostly ignored the unfairness of this domestic division of labor.

Disdain for feminism, Western women's movements and for the conceptualization of women's equality in terms of human rights is shared by anti-liberal and state socialist political regimes. While the notion of "women's emancipation" was an acceptable formulation in Marxist-Leninist ideology, those working toward it could under no condition be called "feminists" (Barna et al. 2018). State socialist policy makers banned

Western feminist literature, and confiscated it when they found intellectuals trying to smuggle it into the country. Achieving gender equality may have been an oft-repeated political goal, but it had to be initiated and carried out on the terms of the Communist Party. Women's grassroots organizations, numerous before World War II, were replaced by the Hungarian National Women's Association, which historians argue, had some degree of independence but was far from a true representative of women's interests nationally, and certainly did not invite a diversity of women's voices to be heard (De Haan 2010; Funk 2014; Ghodsee and Mead 2018).

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Hungary joined the European Union, gender mainstreaming measures enforced by the accession requirements were not widely welcome (Kováts 2020). Indeed, in international surveys Hungarians tended to express more conservative gender role attitudes than citizens of other countries in the Union (Pongracz 2005). Without much conviction, the socialist government of Hungary introduced the necessary regulations and set up the required institutions that monitored the main indicators of gender equality, but popular support for the term or for women's struggle in general was negligible. Small feminist groups worked toward specific goals, including violence against women, or reproductive rights, but funding primarily came from international organizations as did, often, the specific agenda and discourse (Fabian 2014). The EU's gender mainstreaming policies did not gain widespread popularity (Ghodsee 2005; Gregor and Grzebalska 2016).

In sum, women's ongoing participation in paid work was necessary in both state socialist and post-state socialist gender regimes, but little real effort was made at redistributing or socializing care work. Not unrelated to this, neither the state socialist emancipation effort nor the EU's haphazardly enforced and rather limited gender mainstreaming agenda generated much enthusiasm for the concept of gender equality. It is no wonder that in 2010 Orbán's new government could simply dismiss with impunity both the rhetoric and the reality of gender equality policies and assemble a new form of gender regime to support anti-liberal state building.

AN ANTI-LIBERAL GENDER REGIME

But is this anti-liberal gender regime really new? I have identified a number of continuities with Hungary's state socialist past and many of the policies I describe in the next chapter will be familiar from there or from elsewhere in the world. Sylvia Walby, for one, argues that the gender

regimes of authoritarian states are not necessarily unique. Walby (2020) traces the evolution of gender regimes (or forms of patriarchy) from what she calls “domestic” to “public”, and distinguishes at least two varieties of modern public gender regimes: neoliberal and social-democratic. She acknowledges the authoritarian turn in European politics but claims that authoritarianism is easily compatible with neoliberalism, so gender regimes of authoritarian states do not necessarily constitute a unique form. In a similar vein, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015) claim that populist governments have diverse gender ideologies, left-wing in Latin-America, right-wing in Western Europe, hence, they argue, the position of populists on gender issues is unclear and depends on the national context, it is not a unique variety of gender regimes. Perhaps what we are witnessing is simply a turn toward conservatism, characteristic of neo-patrimonial regimes, such as Orbán’s or Putin’s (Szelenyi and Csillag 2015)? Or the continuation of the state socialist legacy of gender inequality? Csányi (2019) connects the new regime’s emphasis on traditional gender roles with the exploitation of women’s cheap labor. He emphasizes the continuities from the 1950s, and describes the novelties emerging after 2010 as primarily in the realms of cultural representations. Or perhaps inconsistency and ambiguity are the defining features of Orbán’s gender policies (Kováts 2020; Szikra 2018)?

Yet others emphasize the coherence and uniqueness in the institutionalization of gender inequality in the social fabric of countries which deny their allegiance to liberal democracy. Historical accounts, for example, point to similarities with “conservative authoritarian gender regimes” in Japan and Germany of the past (Shire and Nemoto 2020). Grzebalska and Pető (2018) claim that Hungary’s and Poland’s authoritarian governments have a unique “modus operandi” closely tied to their gender ideologies, and highlight the foregrounding and mainstreaming of the family rather than gender equality policies (Juhász 2012), the appropriation of the space for fighting for gender equality, and the use of an anti-gender rhetoric to gather all political enemies under one umbrella (Kováts and Poim 2015). Krizsán and Roggeband (2018) also point to the closure of civil space for a gender equality agenda, the relationship between nativism and nationalism in policy making, and the weakening and elimination of women’s movements as common features of gender regimes in illiberal states.

I side with those who see a new variety of gender regime emerging. I argue that since the mid-2010s the government has redefined the problem

of care into one of demographic decline and proceeded to pass a policy package using principles of “carefare”. Carefare policies—to be described in more detail in the next chapter—discipline women into accepting an increased unpaid care work burden combined with unequal treatment in the labor market in exchange for economic survival or, in some cases, slight improvements in the financial position of their families. The government’s gender policies aim to reorganize not just gender relations but social stratification itself by trickling down some limited resources to select “deserving” social groups, whose contributions to the economy is essential and whose votes and political loyalty the government is counting on. To legitimate these policies, the government increasingly relies on the rhetoric of global “anti-gender” movements.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR STATE MANDATED PATRIARCHY: ANTI-GENDER DISCOURSE IN HUNGARY

Numerous authors describe the global spread of the rhetoric against “gender ideology” and its important role in official political communication in Poland and Hungary (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kováts 2018; Kováts and Pető 2017; Kováts and Poim 2015). “Gender” in this context has come to signify political issues and affiliations well beyond the actual reality of gender relations. In Hungary too, the Orbán government has successfully divorced the term “gender” from actual policies about women’s and men’s social participation and turned it into a frenzied political rallying cry. It is not alone in these efforts. Democratic backsliding in several countries (from Poland, Romania to Brazil and beyond) has been accompanied by state-sponsored propaganda which denies the usefulness of the concept “gender” in regulating women’s and men’s role in society (Kováts 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). This “anti-gender” discourse has common themes but a different focus in different countries, a phenomenon, which supports the argument that it is primarily a political tool, a “symbolic glue” which holds allies, enemies and topical political themes together (Kováts and Poim 2015). I will briefly indicate a few elements of the Hungarian variety here and argue that, even though the discourse is not about gender relations, the use of this rhetoric has a lot to do with gender: it sets the stage for ignoring gender equality policies and reinforcing state mandated gender *inequality*.

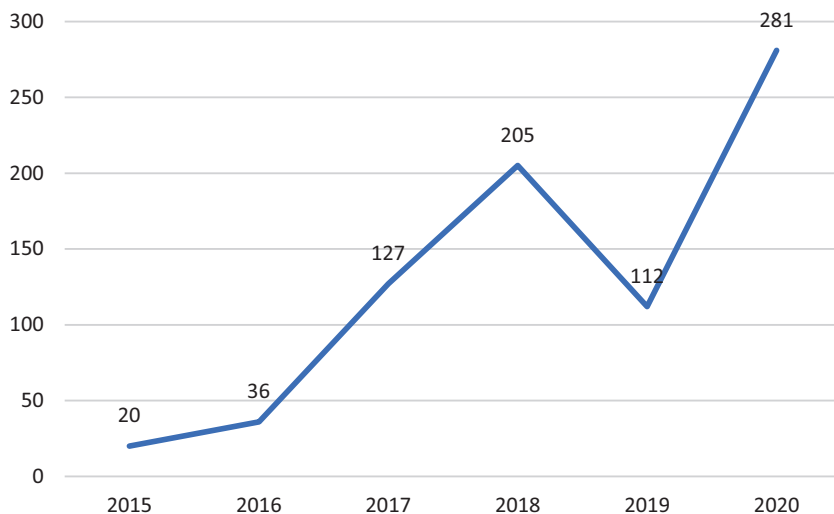


Fig. 1.1 The number of articles which mention the term “gender” in Magyar Idők/Magyar Nemzet

Hungary is a relative late comer to the anti-gender scene, but the deployment of the concept of “gender” has accelerated in the past few years and is fiercely ongoing at the time of writing this book. Even a cursory analysis of a FIDESZ-owned, self-proclaimed pro-government national newspaper, *Magyar Idők* (in English *Hungarian Times*, later renamed *Magyar Nemzet*, or *Hungarian Nation*) illustrates this point. As Fig. 1.1 shows, *Magyar Idők*’s online portal published only 20 articles which used the term “gender” in 2015, while by 2020 a whopping 281 appeared in the paper. (Another pro-government outlet, *Origo*, also increased its attention to gender going from publishing 18 articles, which mention the term “gender” in 2017, to 32 articles in 2018, to 50 in 2019 and 65 in 2020.)

Magyar Idők/Magyar Nemzet’s output represents a more than ten-fold increase within a five-year period between 2015 and 2020 and one which meant that the term gender has been used almost daily on the portal for the past three years. The government whose self-proclaimed goal is to eliminate “gender”, and whose representatives deny its very existence, nevertheless deploys the term more often than has any previous government before them.

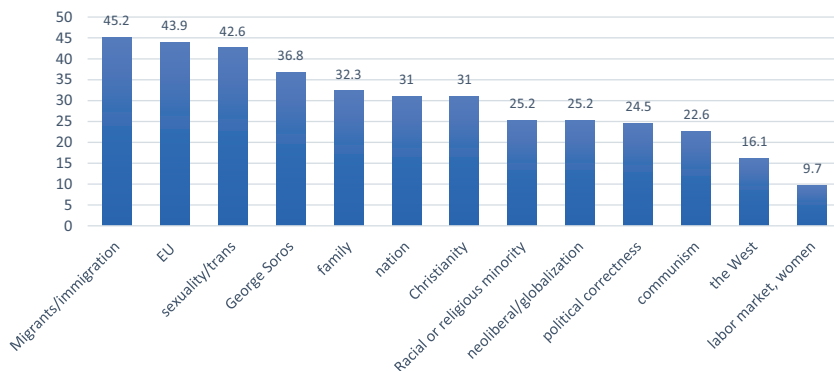


Fig. 1.2 Appearance of key terms in articles which contain the word “gender”, 2018–2020 (in percentages)

This increased usage does not mean, however, an intensification in public discussions about gender relations. Partly in an effort to avoid just that, the government has emptied the meaning of “gender” as a concept signifying relationships and systemic inequalities between men and women, and has repurposed it for use to distinguish and legitimize its political agenda.

I read, coded and analyzed 156 articles published on the online portal of the newspaper in the months of February, May and December of 2018, 2019 and 2020 to get a sense of the government’s message and overall understanding of the term “gender”. During these three years the term gender almost never referred to relationships between men and women. Indeed, as Fig. 1.2 shows, individual women or even women as a group are practically never mentioned in the 155 articles, and in only 15, fewer than 10%, is there any discussion of gender inequality or women’s social position. Most of these 15 address issues of violence, only 3 mention labor market status or social welfare. Even motherhood or parenting is not on the agenda, only the abstract term “family” features with regularity.

Instead, “gender” was most prominently used during these three years to weave a story about migration and Hungary’s struggle against the European Union’s migration quota. Figure 1.2 demonstrates this claim. In 2018 43.6%, in 2019 41.4% and in 2020 47.1% of all articles which contained the term “gender” also mentioned migrations and migrants. For example, *Magyar Nemzet* expresses concern about what it sees as “the

aggressive propaganda about gender and migration” (December 26, 2020) threatening the integrity of the Hungarian nation in one of its articles during the Christmas period. In a similar vein, an article two weeks later assures the public that “Hungary ... resists the integration of masses of migrants and the gender craze” (Jan. 13, 2021) emanating from the West.

The European Union features prominently: 44% of all articles which mention the term “gender” also cite the EU, typically as a pro-gender enemy of the Hungarian nation. A single example suffices to illustrate this from an article published on December 14, 2020: “I was reminded: the gender lobby is hard at work and as part of the migration action plan 34 million migrants will get voting rights in the EU” (December 14, 2020). The relationship between the “gender lobby” and the “migration lobby” is not made explicit, the two are used simultaneously, indicating that they are the same or at least the same people are behind both. The blame for the EU’s migration policy falls on the shoulder of the “gender lobby”. Along the lines of what researchers have described elsewhere gender policies or gender ideology is simply used as a way to identify the “enemy”, the “other side” or “left-liberal forces”, specifically those who seek to impose migrants on the country (*ibid.*).

Gender ideology—if defined—refers to the acceptance of transgender people as legitimate members of society. The Hungarian government and its propaganda machines are openly and increasingly homophobic and reject all forms of sexual identities which are not hetero. Homosexuality is in fact seen as analogous to the problem of migration: several of the EU’s norms, including those related to gender and migration, are understood as detrimental to Hungarian’s values and as externally imposed and alien (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Increasingly during the three years, stories about sex changes and variability in gender identity are problematized, laying the groundwork for various policies on the theme, including Hungary’s ban on sex change, the prohibition of adoption by non-heterosexuals or the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in education. It is no wonder that OECD statistics from 2018 show that Hungarians are the least tolerant of all OECD countries toward ethnic, sexual and religious minorities, a sharp increase from 2008 when the views expressed by Hungarians were no different from the average. Gender is one, although not the only, political tool to construct an external enemy and mobilize for resistance against it.

The concept of “gender” is thus used by Hungary’s top-level politicians and government-controlled media to reinforce, communicate and persuade the population about their anti-liberal agenda. Depicted as a “foreign” concept—hence the use of the English term *gender*—it is steadfastly associated with other themes in the government’s political repertoire and is described as dangerous to Hungarians, indeed to the fate of civilization itself. The government is thus tasked to reject these agents of evil and, as David against the Goliath of Brussels, to fight for the ultimate good of all against the “gender lobbies”, “genderism” and the “gender ideology”.

Indeed, much of this discourse is not directly about gender or gender equality. But it does serve the purpose of taking attention away from gender equality policies and the possibility of claiming rights for women as women. The government has successfully tied the concept of gender equality to “liberalism”, that is, politicized it and associated it with a specific side of the political spectrum. As it is rejecting liberalism, it can thus legitimately and without further explanation reject gender equality policies as well. Note the close association between “gender ideology” and “liberal open society” in the text of Hungary’s Minister of Justice, Judit Varga in a Facebook post on February 1, 2021: “We experience with great concern the breakthrough of the liberal open society. ... Religion, nation, traditional family model ... traditions have no place in that. ... Instead, there is gender ideology, Christian persecution, a technological dictatorship of opinion, destruction of nations, and the creation of a grey uniform society in which everyone must be liberal and an individuality” (the translation is from the original post available online).

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK AND A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH METHODS

This book utilizes original data from several research projects I have conducted over the past six years. Chapter 2 explains the concept of *carefare*: its manifestations in social policy and political discourse, as well as some of its consequences for social and especially gender inequalities. To make the case I primarily rely on data from aggregate sources, such as Hungary’s Central Statistical Office, OECD and Eurostat datasets. In addition, I present results from statistical analyses of data from the dataset EU SILC from the years 2011 and 2017. The European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC) is a harmonized, annually collected EU-wide survey with a large enough case number to allow the analysis of

smaller social groups. I use it to measure what is called the “motherhood penalty” in Hungary and its change over time.

The third form of data come from a series of interviews I conducted with my colleague, Christy Glass over a decade-long exploration of the motherhood penalty in Hungarian firms, the nuances and conditions of its application, as well as how it is experienced (Fodor et al. 2019; Fodor and Glass 2018; Glass and Fodor 2007, 2011, 2018). The most recent series of interviews took place in 2019 when we talked with 24 mothers working in state administration, who responded to questions about the cut in vacation days and the lengthening of work hours, measures introduced simultaneously with the government’s new pronatalist family policies. We sought to find out how this group of young professional women, who are clearly targeted by the family policies, evaluate their significance from their own points of view.

Finally, in Chap. 2 I also present data from my analysis of a document published on the occasion of the International Women’s Day in 2019 by a government funded organization called FICSAK, “Organization for Young Families” (FICSAK 2019). In this heavily subsidized and promoted booklet, high-level Hungarian male politicians and a handful of public personalities offer greetings to women to celebrate the occasion. I only used the quotes from politicians, ignoring otherwise famed participants, but politicians represented the majority. Each quote—altogether 90 of them—is a few paragraphs long and they are collected in a booklet entitled *Women’s Soul as Seen Through Male Eyes*. These texts highlight better than most other documents what role is assigned to women, what achievements and character traits are praised most by top-level policy makers. I coded the quotes by theme and will cite the relevant sections in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 describes how principles of carefare are realized in practice in the special context of Hungary’s child protection system, and specifically among foster care workers. Orbán’s government transformed this area of social service through a new piece of legislation in 2014 and the process and its outcome illustrate brilliantly several aspects of the workings of a carefare state. I started studying the work of foster parents in 2015. During the past six years I conducted over 80 interviews with various actors in the foster care system, most importantly with 52 foster parents living in Pest county, in and near Budapest, as well as in a handful of small towns and villages in the north-east of Hungary. These areas are two of the most populous in terms of foster families. They are also quite different: I

interviewed in the poorest and ethnically most diverse region of Hungary as well as in better-off areas around the capital. I initially got in touch with foster parents through their agencies, so I first talked to those who were preselected possibly for their performance or easy collaboration with the agency. But I gained further contacts from the foster parents themselves so I could broaden the circle of interviewees. Nevertheless, I most likely conducted interviews with foster parents who were generally satisfied with and proud of their work, in addition to a few who held a major grudge and wanted to talk about that. Most interviews were conducted in the home of the foster parent and lasted between 90 and 180 minutes. Foster parents are used to having strangers in their homes who ask about their lives, so they have also developed strategies to respond in a way that preserves their privacy and dignity. But most people who visit them ask about their children and I was interested in them as workers, their daily routines, their experience, their lives and choices. This was a novel experience for many who felt underappreciated as workers and parents, so they typically welcomed the chance to talk. I taped and transcribed the interviews and analyzed them using the software NVivo. Names and minor demographic details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

In addition to talking to foster parents, I conducted regular participant observations in two large foster parent agencies during birth-parent-foster child visitations, and helped out at other events at one of the agencies during the years of 2015–2016. I interviewed over 30 foster care advisors and various actors in the child protection system, including policy experts, managers of foster parent networks and politicians in Ministries who were in charge of the transformation of the system. I obtained data from the Central Statistical Office, the Hungarian Treasury and the Ministry of Economics. Experts and policy makers provided me with numerous documents which were also used for the analysis.

Next, let's explore the concept of carefare.

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