

“What else would be worth it?”

Performing womanhood in the Hungarian extreme right¹

Mária Gubán

“I want every woman to understand that one of the most urgent things we have to do for the nation is fulfilling the vow made at the altar, bearing the children God wants to give us, even if it is an enormous challenge,” writes Gazella (2021, 24), a Catholic blogger in her article in *Duo Gladii*, a bimonthly journal promoting a conservative, Christian nationalist ideology and lifestyle.

The journal is published by HVIM, a Hungarian extreme right movement known for its revisionist views of the historical borders of Greater Hungary and yearly protests against Budapest Pride.² They embody an amalgamation of religious and military principles, viewing Catholicism as the utmost expression of Christianity, yet they do not advocate for peaceful prayer but “fight for a long gone world, which now seems to be a fairy tale” (HVIM n.d., 1).

Gazella calls women to fight for Hungary and its identity, inviting them to engage in “the heroic act of having children” (Gazella 2021, 24). As a full-time mother of four, who shares content about her faith and religious practice, she embodies and broadcasts the values to live by as a patriotic Hungarian woman in the eyes of HVIM members. She identifies the Virgin Mary as the ultimate role model, embodying pure virginity and all-sacrificing motherhood, offering her patronage to those following her footsteps (Gazella 2021). This clear framework of femininity propagates pure and self-sacrificial womanhood and motivates young women of HVIM to engage in the movement’s activities for the betterment of themselves and the nation.

Considering the effort Viktor Orbán’s party puts into making family and religion the country’s core ideology (Juhász 2012), the image of Virgin Mary fits well into the public discourse of the government about gender, demographic crisis, sexuality and a negative Western influence, all of which intertwine in a wartime narrative aimed against a so-called “gender ideology.” It is important to note that the fight against gender ideology extends beyond the definitions of gender and encompasses opposition to other “Western” ideas, such as “the destruction of religious, national and gender identities, and the creation of a mass-produced man” (Szent Korona Radió 2022), as voiced by HVIM.

In this analysis of four young women from HVIM, I contend that engagement in extreme right movements and adherence to Christian-inspired notions of womanhood provide a sense of belonging and purpose deemed unattainable through alternative means.

THE BATTLE AGAINST “GENDER IDEOLOGY” IN HUNGARY

The phrase “gender ideology” was first mentioned in Spanish Church documents in 2001 (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). Over the past two decades, the political discourse surrounding this concept has galvanised numerous groups across Europe, prompting them to address various associated concerns, such as silent protests in France and Italy, to protect the “natural family,” and outbursts against the idea of same-sex marriage in Slovenia or sex education in Croatia (Ibid). However, Orbán has escalated this battle to an unprecedented level by incorporating an article into Hungary’s Basic Law stating, “The mother is a woman and the father is a man,” (Article L of Hungary’s Basic Law), representing a small victory of “normality” against the ideas of the “Declining West.”^{3 4} Fidesz, Orbán’s political party identifies its mission as “family mainstreaming” in opposition to “gender mainstreaming” (Juhász 2012, 4), preserving the religious and cultural identity along with the sovereignty of the country. For the government, these issues only exist on a discursive level

to maintain an illusion of control over the European Union, and to please their Eurosceptic voters. For HVIM, it is a spiritual journey; they practice both on an individual and group level.

ACCESSING HVIM

HVIM’s detailed spiritual guidelines and organised activities aim to integrate ideological principles into members’ daily lives, making them a valuable subject for researching how gender performance and interpretation contribute to a sense of belonging within the Hungarian far right. I got in touch with the movement in the spring of 2022 through Mi Hazánk Mozgalom, a parliamentary party whose members I also interviewed to uncover the imagination and performance of womanhood in the Hungarian far-right.⁵

As someone who comes from left-wing feminist circles, I had neither encountered far-right supporters before my research nor I had the desire to do so. The shift towards illiberalism in my country (Buzogány 2017) prompted my interest in understanding how individuals embody extreme notions of gender, religion, and globalisation in their daily lives. In order to fully see their perspective, I conducted interviews without imposing judgement, allowing participants to articulate their own experiences and realities. This approach and a little luck, namely discovering that my neighbour’s friend is affiliated with Mi Hazánk, facilitated my access to an expanding network of far-right supporters willing to share their perspectives. My participants honoured my receptivity with assistance and invaluable information, inviting me to their private gatherings and sometimes even their homes. Knowing I do not share their ideologies, our interactions were not always free of the hope to “convert” me. However, my boundaries and refusals were always respected.

As someone who comes from left-wing feminist circles, I had neither encountered far-right supporters before my research, nor I had the desire to do so. This time, however, I was fully motivated to open

my world up to realities I had ignored in the past. This approach and a little luck, namely discovering that my neighbour's friend is affiliated with Mi Hazánk, facilitated my access to an expanding network of far-right supporters willing to share their perspectives. My participants honoured my receptivity with assistance and invaluable information, inviting me to their private gatherings and sometimes even their homes. Knowing I do not share their ideologies, our interactions were not always free of the hope to “convert” me. However, my boundaries and refusals were always respected. By the end of March, I had interviewed eighteen members from both groups. This essay centres on four devoted female HVIM members, aged eighteen to 31, aspiring to be “real Hungarian women.”

JOINING THE MOVEMENT, ENTERING WOMANHOOD

All four women reported a previously weak, directionless, and naive self which later, with the assistance of the movement, became all-knowing and committed, a tendency previously identified among far-right sympathiser women (Blee 1996). Difficulties in their personal life preceded their entry into the movement. Márta, twenty years old, was partying for years and felt extremely empty.⁶ Nóra, 31 years old, a healthcare worker, joined the political movement right after her mother died, and she was alienated from the rest of her family. Entering the movement, they felt like they were finally a part of something bigger. “I knew I had been looking for this my entire life,” Márta told me.

The movement's spiritual foundation draws heavily from Christianity, emphasising the importance of religious rituals, the sanctity of marriage and prayers, broadcasting knightdom, loyalty, and purity (HVIM n.d.). For women, this translates into the expectation of “total devotion” and a greater capacity for love, acceptance, and self-sacrifice, as described by Márta. The idealised portrayal of women is reminiscent of Gazella's words and the iconic figure of the Virgin Mary, who holds a significant role in Hungarian historical narratives as a unifying symbol.

In Hungarian history, the first king, Stephen I, dedicated the lands of the country to the Virgin Mary. Additionally, she has been invoked as a symbol of resistance against Communism and as a role model for national-conservative women who opposed state-led feminism (Pető 2010). The Virgin Mary appears in an article by Duo Gladii, as a “white goddess.” One of her highlighted strengths is speaking only seven times throughout the Bible (Kolonits 2021).

This portrayal aligns with the concept of attaining a higher form of womanhood through submission, as articulated by Nóra within the context of HVIM’s guidelines. “It’s one of those things that you have to build in yourself,” she said. “I was put in my place [...] I don’t want to overpower men anymore. I have a stubborn personality, but I’ve learned, I’ve read, I’ve talked to other women from the movement.”

Liza, an eighteen year-old high school student, similarly claimed that with the movement’s assistance, she learnt to relinquish her dominant personality, allowing men to assert their masculinity, which, according to Nóra, is characterised by a desire to always be right. This dichotomous perspective on gender differences is what Glicke and Fiske call complementary gender differentiation. It emphasises the purity and goodness of women, rewards them for status-irrelevant traits, and is linked to benevolent sexism (Glicke and Fiske 2001). Among HVIM members, this notion is clearly present, indicating that the journey to womanhood entails the internalisation of ambivalent sexism.

When I asked Nóra if it was worth constraining herself to conform, she gave me a weird look. “What else would be worth it?,” she said. Women from the movement revealed several stories of chivalry, being “treated like a princess” and always protected. Chivalry, by the women I interviewed, is perceived as an element of heterosexual intimacy which suggests men and women are incomplete without each other and is closely related to the benevolent aspect of ambivalent sexism (Glicke and Fiske 2001). Márta expressed this sentiment, “I can’t imagine being a woman without a man.”

“THE MOST SACRED VOCATION”

Another virtuous role of the Virgin Mary to follow is motherhood. As Yuval-Davis (1997) has identified, nationalist women work on the nation’s biological and cultural reproduction, a mission deemed highly significant by female HVIM members. Márta believes it is her duty to give birth to Hungarians because she loves her country. Her dedication to motherhood goes beyond domestic chores and encompasses a higher purpose of guiding her children towards salvation in the Catholic faith.

Among my interviewees, only Eszter, 30 years old, was a mother at that time. She embodies what is considered pure and divine femininity, dedicating herself mostly to raising her children. Eszter emphasised the significance of education as a means to establish a stable ideological basis, preventing “potential deviations” that arise from children “trying to fill in the gaps,” as she put it. The ideological education of her children gives her transcendental long-term goals and a sense of mission, which are found to enhance psychological well-being significantly (Chen et al. 2019). She is not isolated in this experience; mothers in the movement support each other. These interactions enable women to foster “collective self-esteem” and attain a sense of superiority in dimensions unrelated to their status (Glick and Fiske 2001, 119).

A DANGEROUS FAMILY ⁷

Individualism is strongly rejected by the movement. They define themselves as a “spiritual family” (HVIM n.d., 22). This kind of comradery makes it possible for members to trust others with their lives. “It’s more than friendship”, Anita, a 21 year-old university student, said. “You can count on each other in any situation. Even at two in the morning if your life is in danger.”

This strong cohesion, complemented by dark outfits, weapon training and threatening public actions, earned the movement the label of

a potential national security threat (Szijártó 2019), which the movement refuses: “We don’t wake up every day with the urge to fight or defend the nation” a male informant told me. “But whenever we have to do it, we will be ready.”

For a short-lived initiative, they involved women in military-like activities since many had voiced their dissatisfaction with the limited room provided for the performance of womanhood in the movement and being left out of real action. The unit of *Hiúzok* (Lynxes) was born, and the mission was to train female warriors, teach them cartography, combat, or how to bake bread in the woods, disassemble an AK-47 automatic weapon and be good nationalist mothers. Once, they even had a Molotov cocktail workshop. “You just can’t imagine that powerful feeling when it finally explodes,” Liza said. “It’s sooo fucking sexy.” Besides providing a glimpse into forbidden masculinity, these breaks from traditional womanhood also prepare women for situations requiring the aforementioned defence.

THE EXCEPTIONS

Anita and Liza displayed a stronger inclination towards engaging in these masculine pursuits. Nonetheless, male members emphasised that their participation in such activities does not diminish their worth as women. They are Amazons. A young man from HVIM summarises the phenomenon as follows:

They are the type of women who have very strong masculine characteristics. Motherhood wouldn’t be enough for them. These women should not be forced into a situation where they live these feminine roles and they suppress all the other things in themselves, because it’s not healthy. Anyone who has those Amazon qualities should be allowed to fulfil them.

This womanhood subtype allows women to reject limited roles assigned to them and fight for the nation beyond reproduction. It justifies females filling more important roles in the movement

and opens up possibilities for the future. Gender dynamics within the extreme right seem to be undergoing changes. The far-right notions of women as mere “reproductive engines” (Miller-Idriss and Pilkington 2019) and the quasi-feminist concept of fellow “race warriors” in saving humanity (Lyons 2016) intertwine, incorporating religious symbolism and even liberal ideas, influenced by the prevailing political and societal conditions. HVIM is a movement actively involved in shaping and debating gender within their organisation and in Hungarian society.

Female members seem to sacrifice sexual and reproductive freedom, as well as agency, in many aspects of life. However, they do not see it as a trade-off. As Eszter concluded: “It’s just that I’ve never seen a happy feminist.” HVIM satisfies women’s need for belonging and guidance, offering camaraderie and protection. The movement provides a sense of purpose and adheres to traditional womanhood, yet adapts by endorsing exploration of masculine activities when younger females seek such freedom. Through submission and compliance, women achieve a sense of belonging within the movement and secure acceptance within the conservative Hungarian society.

Notes

- ¹ The terminology is based on the 2019 RAN factbook, *Far-Right Extremism: A Practical Introduction*. HVIM is considered extreme right due to its opposition to democracy and acceptance of violence against the enemy.
- ² Short for *Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom* (‘Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement’), which relates to the 64 counties of historical Greater Hungary, “the long-gone fairytale” to be resurrected.
- ³ “Normality” is a frequently applied rhetoric of the Hungarian far-right (Vékony 2022, 135; Nagy 2019). Based on statements and public speeches, “normality” involves cisness, heterosexuality, monogamy and the need for forming a family and having children (Vékony 2022; HVIM n.d.; Szakács 2022).

- ⁴ “Declining West” is a term commonly employed by Hungarian conservatives or used ironically by liberals. Its roots may be traced back to Oswald Spengler’s 1918 work, “The Decline of the West”, a title that has resonated within the Hungarian collective consciousness.
- ⁵ Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement) is a party established by László Toroczkai, former leader and founder of HVIM. Members acknowledge their groups as “strategic partners,” indicating an ideological collaboration and shared events.
- ⁶ In this essay, I use pseudonyms to conceal the identity of my interviewees.
- ⁷ Dóra Dúró, the most famous Hungarian female politician of the far-right, referred to motherhood as “the most sacred vocation” (Szakács 2022, 19).

References

- Blee, Kathleen Marie. 1996. “Becoming A Racist.” *Gender & Society*, 10 (6): 680–702.
- Buzogány, Aron. 2017. “Illiberal Democracy in Hungary: Authoritarian Diffusion or Domestic Causation?” *Democratization* 24 (7): 1307–1325.
- Chen, Ying, Eric S. Kim, Howard K. Koh, A. Lindsay Frazier, and Tyler J. VanderWeele. 2019. “Sense of Mission and Subsequent Health and Well-Being Among Young Adults: An Outcome-Wide Analysis.” *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 188 (4): 664–673.
- Gazella. 2021. “Nőként a Nemzet Szolgálatában.” *Duo Gladii* 1 (11): 23–26.
- Glick, Peter, and Susan Fiske. 2001. “Ambivalent Sexism.” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 33: 115–188.
- Szent Korona Rádió. 2022. “Hogyan Álljunk Ellen Hatékonyan az LMBTQP-lobbinak? – Kónyi-Kiss Botond Előadása a Fejér Szövetség Rendezvényén.” Accessed 3 June 3 2022.
<https://szentkoronaradio.com/blog/2022/02/07/hogyanalljunk-ellen-hatekonyan-az-lmbtqp-lobbinak-konyi-kiss-botond-eloadasa-a-fejerszovetseg-rendezvenyen/>
- Hungary’s Basic Law [Hungary], 25 April 2011, Accessed June 30, 2022.
<https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1100425.ATV&searchUrl=/gyorskereso%3Fkeyword%3Dalapt%25C3%25B6rv%25C3%25A9nyek>

- Hungary's Basic Law, Article L (2011) Accessed 14 May 2022.
<https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100425.atv>
- HVIM. .n.d. "Íránymutatás és Vármegyések Kiskatekizmusa." Self-published.
- Juhász, Borbála. 2012. "Orbán's Politics – A Gender Perspective." Budapest: Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Accessed March 3, 2022.
http://fesbp.hu/common/pdf/Nachrichten_aus_Ungarn_1_2012.pdf
- Kolonits, László. 2021. "Magna Mater - A Női Princípium Megnyilvánulása az Isteni Szférában." *Duo Gladii* 1 (11): 5-10.
- Lyons, Matthew, 2016. "Alt-right: More Misogynistic Than Many Neonazis. Accessed 5 May 2022.
<http://threewayfight.blogspot.hu/2016/12/alt-right-more-misogynistic-than-many.html>
- Miller-Idriss, Cynthia, and Hilary Pilkington. 2019. "Women are Joining the Far Right – We Need to Understand Why." *The Guardian*. Accessed 4 May 2022.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/24/women-far-right-gender-roles-radical-right-migrant-muslim>.
- Nagy, Norbert. 2019. "A Normalitás Pártján az Aberráció Ellen – Akcióban a Betyársereg és a Mi Hazánk. Mi Hazánk Mozgalom." Accessed 3 May 2022.
<https://mihazank.hu/a-normalitas-partjan-az-abberacio-ellen-akcioban-a-betyarsereg-es-a-mi-hazank/>
- Paternotte, David, and Roman Kuhar. 2017. "The Anti-Gender Movement in Comparative Perspective." In *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*, edited by David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, 253-276. Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd.
- Pető, Anikó. 2010. "Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe in a Historical Perspective." In *Reframing Demographic Change in Europe. Perspectives on Gender and Welfare State Transformations*, edited by Heike Kahlert and Waltraud Ernst, 189-201. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). 2019. Factbook. "Far-right extremism: A practical introduction." RAN Centre of Excellence.
- Szakács, Árpád. 2022. "Dúró Dóra: Egy Nő Harca Magyarorszáért." Balatonfőkajár-Köröstárkány: Kárpátia Stúdió.

Szijártó, Livia. 2019. “Alkalmazott Pszichológiai Módszerek a Szélsőséges Csoportok és a Terrorizmus Elleni Harcban.” PhD Dissertation, Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem Hadtudományi Doktori Iskola.

Vékony, Csongor Levente. 2022. A Nemi Identitás Válsága. Magyar Életvédők Kézikönyve I. Budapest: Self-Published.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: SAGE Publications.