

Wilsch, Martina

MARTA BOTIKOVÁ AND ZITA DEÁKY LÁNYOK, ASSZONYOK SZLOVÁKIÁBAN ÉS  
MAGYARORSZÁGON (1955-1989), AHOGY KÉT ETNOLÓGUS NŐ LÁTTA<sup>1</sup>

DOI 10.35402/kek.2024.3.27

The gender lens in reflecting the social fabrics is inseparable from understanding the diverse processes in the present and past. The gender-biased perspectives from which we look at social processes need deconstruction not only in the areas of inquiry but also at a finer level of our own (also theoretical) thinking and conceptualization (Ryan, 2004). Reflecting Central Europe's cultural, political, and social phenomena during the period of state socialism from a gender perspective is of pivotal importance for understanding the functioning of the mechanisms of power and post-totalitarian societies (Hostová, 2017). However, in the Slovak context, it is still somewhat incomplete. Although gender has a legitimate place in research in ethnology in the Central European region, gender reflection (not only) in socialism cannot be considered sufficient.

The authors, experienced ethnologists Marta Botiková and Zita Deáky, undertook an ambitious task in the publication *Lányok, asszonyok Szlovákiában és Magyarországon (1955–1989) ahogy két etnológus nő látta / Dievčatá, ženy na Slovensku a v Maďarsku (1955–1989) očami dvoch etnologičiek* [Girls and Women in Slovakia and Hungary (1955–1989) through the eyes of two ethnologists] – to approach selected aspects of the everyday life (ordinary and festive) of girls and women from the years 1955–1989 from an ethnological perspective. The dimension of everydayness, individual life projects, and trajectories creates a complex tangle of social structures. Ethnological sources of everyday life positioned in broader historical, social, or cultural contexts are one of the strengths of this publication.

The publication is bilingual, written in both Hungarian and Slovak. The text complements visual appendices such as photographs or pictures from the press and magazines. In terms of content, the publication consists of six thematically diverse parts. In the first introductory part, the authors present the goals they wanted to achieve with the publication. Their main ambition is to outline the development process of everyday and festive life in the times of socialism

in Slovakia and Hungary. The authors state that the selection of thematic areas for the publication was without the ambition of a monographic treatment, as the image of socialist Slovakia or Hungary cannot be generalized. Ultimately, this is not even possible in the essence of the ethnological or anthropological approach. Therefore, with a thematically discretionary focus, the authors emphasize selected aspects of this period specific to women and girls and their life in the socialist system, “what unites us, what we had experienced together the same, or in a similar way”... (Botiková, Deáky, 2022: 11), as in the socialist period political events in every country created a similar situation and determined people's lives.

In the first part of the publication, the authors introduce readers to both countries' critical historical, political, social, and economic landmarks, the historical period and political contexts of the socialist establishment, and their significance or impact on the everyday life of people in socialism. The following thematic sections look at the family, its transformations or changes in its structure, diet, clothing, hygiene, and holidays.

The section dedicated to the family and its transformations is the most robust. The authors note the influence of broader political and socio-economic contexts on family structure changes, women's roles or strategies for a life partner selection, marriage, divorce, and cohabitation without marriage. In the descriptions and interpretations, they contextualize the development in the urban environment with the rural environment and their intermingling. Nevertheless, more importantly, they connect fundamental societal changes with their consequences on the micro-stories of everyday life. The descriptions supplement also the macro-perspective, based upon the available sociological, and statistical data. They approach processes typical for this period, such as the effects of collectivization, the population moving from the countryside to the cities, or the subsequent change in consumer habits. In this context, for example, it is interesting to observe the processes of accelerating changes in the family structure in the context of women's political and

<sup>1</sup> This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons

socio-economic strategies since the 1970s, similar to changes in Western Europe (for example, the parallel existence of several family and household models at the same time, nuclearization of families, increasing divorce rates and similar). The authors pay special attention to policies for controlling reproduction, contraceptive methods, and the high rate of abortion in this period. Understanding the formation of the notion of women's reproductive health in socialism and its institutionalization, reproductive policies, and their effects on the family and society are of pivotal importance for understanding the challenges for women's reproductive health even in the current post-socialist society.

The section dedicated to food and eating provides extensive information that illustrates transformations and points out that eating became a means and an expression of political struggles. Eating and food are directly related to women's role in families, society, the gender division of labour, or reproductive work in the family. In this part, they deal with the processes of modernization and the coexistence of traditional and modern technologies, the changing organization of catering and eating places, changes in consumer habits, and the onset of consumerism. In the section devoted to clothing, the authors capture dynamic changes in terms of forms, production, fashion trends, or broader influences on clothing that geographically go beyond Central Europe. In a separate section, the authors address the changing standards of hygiene and body care in the family, as well as women's intimate hygiene. They illustrate the diversity of transformations of the notion of cleanliness, hygiene, and modernization across generations and environments. The last section, also relatively extensive, is the field of holidays, whether in breakthrough events in human life, social holidays, or holidays of the calendar cycle. An essential aspect in this section is that the authors draw attention to the gradual transformation of these holidays under the influence of the socialist establishment, many of which were supported and proposed by the regime. At the same time, they illustrate the "split official and private sphere", when people created their own events in a private environment in addition to the official and followed holiday events. The socialist regime instrumentally and ideologically intervened in the symbolic experience of holidays to such an extent that they persist in a modified form to this day (Teachers' Day, Mother's Day...).

In several places, cross-sectionally across the publication, the authors also use examples from their

own field research, and these data appropriately illustrate and contextualize the described areas. However, the publication would be enriched if there were more empirical ethnological illustrations from Slovakia and Hungary.

I appreciate the reflection of positionality in both authors and their awareness of their own influence on the writing of the publication. The habitus, individual life story, and its disruptions, social identities, or specific personality of the researcher influence both substantive and practical aspects of the research process – from research, data collection, and analysis to writing itself (Carling, Erdal, Ezzati, 2014). In the introduction, the authors admit that when creating the publication, they were not only in the position of authors but also of women and, at the same time, researchers and ethnologists, for whom the period under study meant a vital part of their life story and professional career that they experienced. They do not strive for objectivity and generalization and admit that they are respondents who bring their own lived experience to the resulting work (Botiková, Deáky, 2022: 15).

The task that both authors undertook with the publication was ambitious. The examined period represents an extraordinarily dynamic and complex period in terms of political contexts and social or economic changes that continued differently, in different dynamics depending on the territorial and social contexts, in the perspective of the two countries. A comparative perspective, supplementing perspectives from rural or urban environments, using historical or statistical sources, combined with own empirical material, fragments of material, and spiritual culture, offers readers an immersion into the everyday life of the middle-class population in Slovakia and Hungary. On the other hand, however, the publication remains on a rather descriptive and illustrative level, which looks at the situation of women and girls in socialism in the usual way, without reflecting on gender as an analytical category that could represent a more significant contribution to theoretical and academic thinking about gender in ethnology.

The authors devote space to the changing roles of women in several parts of the publication, whether in connection with the regime's pressure on women to be employed, to change the gender division of labour, or to take responsibility for caring for family members.

They draw attention to the socialist narrative of "equality", the "ideal of the working woman", and the

propaganda dedicated to women and their place in society, which the socialist regime used instrumentally and pragmatically, pursuing an ideological, political, and economic purpose. Despite the detailed work of both authors for a deeper understanding of the context and processes related to the position and life of women in this period, for me, as a feminist-oriented researcher, a more consistent gender lens is missing. Such an approach would help deconstruct selected themes in addition to the axis of political and socio-economic dimensions and allow for analysing gender asymmetries and inequalities, women's inequality in society, violations of women's human rights in socialism, and the category of gender as such. Authors with an analytical category of gender, which could enable them to overcome the limitations of reducing gender issues only to the situation of women during socialism (Hostová, 2017), do not work. The publication also lacks a critical reflection on the concepts of forced emancipation or emancipation from above or on the diversity of actors who determined gender culture during socialism and their influence (Havelková, Oates-Indruchová, 2014). Concepts with which the socialist regime also worked ideologically, such as equality or free choice and equal conditions, would also deserve critical (not only descriptive) reflection.

However, the authors did not aim for such a critical reflection or apply specific theoretical starting points. The publication represents a standard ethnographic work, and its contribution is based on a consistent and detailed description of the thematic areas investigated and their comparison between countries, including rich empirical and visual material. The publication reflects women's experiences in the observed period. Also, it stimulates thinking about the effects of the construction of gender in socialism on social processes in the post-socialist period in Central Europe. The work is not only a source of knowledge about the life of women and girls under socialism in Slovakia and

Hungary but also a basis for further work on this topic, considering various theoretical perspectives, including critical gender reflection.

## References

- Botiková, M., Deáky, Z. (2022). *Lányok, aszozonyok Szlovákiában és Magyarországon (1955-1989) ahogy két etnológus nőlátta / Dievčatá, ženy na Slovensku a v Maďarsku (1955–1989) očami dvoch etnologičiek* [Girls and Women in Slovakia and Hungary (1955–1989) through the eyes of two ethnologists]. Budapest – Bratislava: Faculty of Arts of Eotvos Loránd University, Comenius University in Bratislava.
- Carling, J., Erdal, M. B., Ezzati, R. (2014). Beyond the insider–outsider divide in migration research. *Migration Studies*, 2(1), 36–54. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnt022>
- Havelková, H., Oates-Indruchová, L. (Eds.) (2014). *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism. An Expropriated Voice*. Routledge.
- Hostová, I. (2017, December 15). *Príbehy vyvlastnenej emancipácie žien*. ASPEKTin – Feministický Webzin. Available at: <http://www.aspekt.sk/content/aspektin/pribehy-vyvlastnenej-emancipacie-zien>.
- Ryan, L. (2004). Family Matters: (E)migration, Familial Networks and Irish Women in Britain. *The Sociological Review*, 52(3), 351–370. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00484.x>
- Első közlés: Willsch, M. (2023). *Slovenský národopis*, 71 (4), 448–451 <https://doi.org/10.3157/71SN.2023.4.38> | Book Reviews / Book Essays