

Consumption and women's rights

A conference report written by Emília Barna

Recently, many people all over the Western world rejoiced about the new advertisement of a transnational shoe company, celebrating its sensitizing towards gender equality and the diversity of women's experiences. Others drew the attention to the fact that while using feminism as a marketing strategy, the company exploits hundreds of thousands of female employees in Vietnam with poor working conditions and has only one woman among its executives. *Consumption and women's rights*, a forum organised by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in Budapest on 22 May 2017, discussed questions related to such cases. How do global inequalities come into play when we speak about consumption? What is the role of economic actors in shaping our ideas about what it means to be a "real woman" or even a "good mother/parent", and what we need to buy to achieve this? How is demand raised in the beauty industry, the sports industry, the parenting industry and beyond? What can we do when we can only afford products produced under inhumane working conditions on the other side of the world? How does the region of East-Central Europe connect to the global economic hierarchy, and how does it affect consumption patterns and aspirations? What is the role of individuals, companies, nation states and supranational actors in making a change?

Eszter Kováts, FES project co-ordinator, opened the forum with a reference to the late Zygmunt Bauman, who named two doxas that we have to question if we want a cultural revolution. Firstly, that increasing the gross national product is a solution to all social problems (as opposed to putting an end to poverty, illiteracy, or increasing the quality of healthcare), and secondly, that a "good life" always involves consumption. An article by Katalin Molnár-Bánffy from November 2016, entitled "Nagyon fekete péntek" (*Very Black Friday*), provided a concrete starting point for the event. Molnár-Bánffy wrote about how we are manipulated by the industries built around motherhood and beauty, and how these create a set of expectations through the constructions of the "good mother" and "attractive woman", projecting to us an upper-middle-class female image. Similarly, a leftist feminist perspective suggests that we look at how women's opportunities are shaped by global economic relations. We should be aware of the contradictions of companies communicating feminist messages that reinforce stereotypical images of women, while at the same time relying on the work of hundreds of thousands of women in Eastern Europe and South-East Asia performed under inhumane circumstances, and while hardly having any women amongst their board members.

To underline the timeliness of the forum, Kováts named two relevant debates, the one around the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Hungary as well as the one around the World Family Congress and the European Pro-Life Forum, which are both held in Budapest at the end of May. She observed critically how both debates are characterised by an interpretation of questions related to materiality and global power as a culture war, accompanied by the construction of a false dichotomy between "us" and "them".

The first half of the conference consisted of three presentations. The panel was chaired by **Andrea Pető**, Professor at the Department of Gender, Central European University, who in her introductory speech referred to consumption as a framework determining the social position of an individual, along the logic of “anyone is worth what they have”, and how the vulnerability of women is multiplied by them also being the object of consumption.

In her talk, sociologist **Lenka Simerska** drew on the results of a 2014 study looking at the garment industry, including textile, leather, shoes and apparel production, of the Czech Republic and other countries, published in the report [“Stitched Up”](#). The most important conclusion of the study involving ten countries and more than three hundred workers employed in the garment industry is that contrary to common perception, the “Made in Europe” label is no guarantee for ethical consumption, as exploitation affects female workers not only in Asia, but also in East-Central Europe. Also, about half of the clothes imported into EU countries are “made in Europe”.

Historically, the garment industry was a dominant industry in the Czech Republic, however, during the past twenty-five years it has lost half of its production capacity, which has led to a loss of about a hundred thousand workplaces, most of them belonging to women. Today the industry consists of almost four hundred registered companies, as well as twenty thousand workers employed in the grey zone, that is, by small, unregistered companies. It is export-oriented, embedded into international supply chains, and invested in the development of technical textile and nanotechnology. Gender inequalities, according to Simerska, are present in the industry along two dimensions: firstly, women are more likely to do more traditional jobs such as cutting, sewing, and ironing, while men are more likely to work in technical jobs and in supervisory positions. Secondly, women are more likely to be employed in the clothing industry, while men are more likely to be employed in the technical textile industry. And while the garment industry as a whole pays the lowest wages in the Czech Republic, low wages and poor working conditions are more typical for more traditional segments of the industry as well as more traditional jobs, which means inequalities are structured along gender lines. Poor working conditions mean hard work, pressure, health problems (dust, heat in the case of ironing, toxic fumes, carpal tunnel syndrome, damage to the eyes), overtime, working Saturdays, and insecurity (e.g. if there is no order, there is no work and no pay).

Simerska views the redistribution of expenses and profit as a possible way out of this exploitative system, which could also mean a solution to the problem that ethical consumption is expensive. In addition, she argued, new forms of organising, a revitalisation of unions, gender solidarity, including female solidarity as manifested in consumption are required. She highlighted the importance of the transparency of producers, and of raising our voice against poor working conditions. It is necessary for value to stay “at home”, and for the wage gap between men and women to be eliminated, in order that women are able to regulate the market through their own consumption behaviour.

Tomáš Profant, lecturer at the Institute of European Studies and International Relations, Comenius University, emphasised the interconnectedness between economic production and culture – in this case, gender stereotypes – in his talk, and the fact that even if companies fight against gender inequalities, they are not necessarily successful. Referring to Pun Ngai’s ethnographic research conducted in China, and Małgorzata Maciejewska’s similar work in Poland, he argued that gender stereotypes influenced not only the selection of employees on the part of the employer, but also employees’ choice of employer. In Maciejewska’s study, women employed in LG’s television set production occupied more insecure positions than men, while also being dominated by men in higher positions. Not only are women expected to do work that pays less and to be less skilled, but they are also socialised into accepting this situation – thus culture, that is, stereotypes, are being reproduced by the economy.

Profant mentioned two types of answers to the question of whether the market can be gender-neutral. One argumentation is the perspective Marxist feminism associated with Silvia Federici provides, which understands gender inequality as an essential aspect of capitalism, and according to which therefore gender equality would lead to the collapse of capitalism, since reproductive work is necessary for the production of capital. According to the second type of argumentation, gender equality is possible to achieve in the West at least. As an example, he referred to au-pairs from Central Europe employed in Western Europe, thanks to whom Western mothers are able to take paid jobs, while reproductive work is also paid for. (While he did not elaborate on this, there is of course a price to pay, namely power relations such as between madame–servant and West–East).

According to **Petra Aczél**, Associate Professor of Corvinus University, consumer culture refers to some kind of surplus or excess, assuming that the consumer consumes more than necessary and the producer produces more than needed. Referring to three historical periods identified by Gilles Lipovestky, she called our times the era of hyper-consumption, characterised not only by the increasing quantity of consuming, but also the fact that consumption penetrates all segments, the space-time of our lives. Romantic relationships are included in this, which become automatized spaces of consumption thanks to applications such as Tinder. As a result, our consumer culture also becomes more intimate and brands feel closer to us, and provide ways in which we can reinvent ourselves. She explained how the language of emotions has permeated technology, while the language of economics has permeated relationships. The principle of non-equivalent quality, however, warns us that we are trying to express the monetary value of things – such as a “like” – that are essentially unsuitable for this. Aczél also drew attention to the fact that marketing communication is increasingly building on emphasising speed and an effortless experience. This is illustrated by the principle of “taking the waiting out of wanting”, which, as an economic concept, refers to quick profit, while according to certain human ethologists, it has also affected human relationships in the sense that we have begun to lose a complexity that can only be achieved with time. “Slow” movements are addressing precisely this issue. Aczél’s concluding thought was that hundred, or a hundred and fifty years ago we legalised romance, commodified the body, and technicised emotions, but by today, we have commodified romance, technicised sexuality, and emotionalised technology.

In reply to the question of Tomáš Profant, referring to the gender aspects of the above, Aczél pointed to the objectification of women, and the fact that according to many, consumer culture is driven by women.

The second half of the conference consisted of panel also chaired by Andrea Pető and including **Laura Sarolta Baritz**, Dominican nun, economist; **Gergely Csányi**, sociologist **Szabina Kerényi**, sociologist, **Dóra Máriási**, psychologist, and **Kata Molnár-Bánffy**, communication expert. Sister Laura began with the statement that the economy dominated society, and women were the means to a consumer being. According to her approach of virtue ethics, we may arrive at a solution by reversing the aim and the means in a way that the utmost aim should be woman and man, that is, the human being, and the means should be economics and consumption. This requires a paradigm shift, as a result of which a system of human values would replace the logic of the market, and a moral realisation of oneself and the common good would become primary goals. Consumption would be regulated by the virtues of moderateness, justness, and prudence, while the relation between man and woman would primarily become one of cooperation.

As a member of the Working Group for Public Sociology “Helyzet”, Gergely Csányi’s starting point was world-systems analysis. In the world system of transnational value chains, different constructions of femininity (for instance, “good mother” or “attractive woman”) are produced in different positions of the system – such as in different classes or nation states –, and these are maintained by the system. Reacting to Simerska’s assertion, he argued that ethical consumption is unavoidably expensive, since economic competition forces companies to push down wages as low as possible, and this is exploitation itself. He also drew attention to the fact that ethical consumption requires a certain worldview, and homegrown production a certain economic background, which possibilities are certainly not available to everyone to the same extent.

Reflecting on Petra Aczél’s talk and the question of over-consumption, Szabina Kerényi continued by explaining that only those with an access to consumption are able to consume. She thus reinforced Csányi’s doubt regarding ethical consumption as choice, and thus regarding individual responsibility. She mentioned that she is part of a feminist mothers’ movement, and emphasised how the “baby industry” built around mother- and parenthood comprises an enormous segment of consumption. Tensions and inequalities between genders are sharpened when one becomes a parent, the woman is trapped by social patterns. She extracts herself from the sphere of production at this time, only to become increasingly involved in consumption, in accordance with the interests of the market. A “responsible parent” gets hold of all the important technological tools, while also realising herself as a woman. Along with this, an invisible dimension appears in the domestic division of labour with the woman taking the role of a manager, being responsible for the tasks around food, clothing, the health and schooling of the child. Parenting makes it even more evident that consumption is a privilege, as is the way out.

As a practising and critical psychologist, Dóra Máriási stressed that while consumer society was constantly generating consumption, it also stigmatised those that are unable to control their consumption. Body dysmorphic disorders, low self-esteem, eating disorders, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, overeating, obesity – which, referring back to Aczél, she

connected to over-consumption – or obsession with health all provide illustrative examples. From a critical perspective, Máriási also spoke about the responsibility of psychology as a discipline, for instance, through the subfield of the psychology of advertising, in having contributed to the creation of the image of the emancipated, consciously consuming woman previously mentioned by Kerényi, who is responsible for the health, eating, clothing of the family, as well as home-making, leisure, and partner choice. The role of a psychologist according to Máriási cannot be restricted to helping their client in making the “right choice”, in making conscious decisions, they need to help them get out of the logic of consumption instead. She also emphasised the importance of alternative representations of femininity.

Kata Molnár-Bánffy encounters the labour market phenomena mentioned during the forum in her function as entrepreneur and company director. She reflected on the fact that she employs members of the Budapest intelligentsia, which means she does not witness 90% of the problems.

In response to the criticism, Sister Laura emphasised the difference between ethical and moral consumption and the fact that the latter does not involve any extra costs, it rather refers to an inner moral stance. She mentioned so-called social entrepreneurs as a positive example, who wish to realise some kind of value, and profit is only a means to achieve this. Csányi, on the other hand, drew attention to the fact that the meaning of the happiness and self-realisation mentioned by Sister Laura varies from society to society and era to era, since they are products of a given economic system. Máriási added to this that the basis of consumption is the fact that what I buy has to become a value. The “beautiful woman” is a value, and going against it means a great threat to women – I receive a lot of reward if I am a beautiful woman and I lose access to a lot of things if I do not conform to this. All of this becomes internalised, a part of our identities, our selves, and that is why it is so strong. Molnár-Bánffy reinforced this by emphasising the importance of self-esteem, which we try to restore through consumption, and she also observed the difficulty of raising consciousness. As an example, she cited a reaction to her article “Nagyon fekete péntek” (*Very Black Friday*): “Of course, making us feel guilty again”, which hints at the importance of shopping to many women who have no spare time left besides housework and caring for their children in relation to their own self-esteem, and how we should not forget this. Csányi also underlined what Máriási had stated before, that certain constructions, including the social constructions of gender, are not only internalised from a very early age, but they themselves form the human psychical structure. If the constructions of the “attractive woman” and “good mother” are built into one’s self, yet the objective means to realise these are not given, then that is the worst case scenario.

According to Molnár-Bánffy, we have responsibility for the creation of the common good in our small circles – for her, in her own company. She mentioned that in Hungary 75% of women employed by private companies work in small- and medium-size enterprises, and in contrast to large corporations, it is easier to follow certain ethical and human norms in these.

Kerényi mentioned that as part of her work within *Másállapotot a szülészetben*, a movement fighting for the creation of dignity in childbirth, she experienced that access to this is heavily determined by economics. There are huge differences among regions in terms of the

possibilities available for someone at the beginning of their lives, and these only get stronger with institutionalisation. She stressed that the market also heavily targeted those living in extreme poverty, with cheap products of appalling quality, available in mass quantities. She expressed the opinion that there were no differences among participants in the panel in their visions for the future, and that in order to take steps, we needed to face the fact that we are living in an exploitative system with enormous power imbalances, and those making the profit have no interest in changing this.

The conference was certainly productive in exploring adequate frameworks for analysing and critiquing these power imbalances and exploitation. The talks encouraged us to look beyond the levels of representation and discourse and examine the relations of production, both locally and globally, and remain sceptical towards such ostensibly easily available solutions as ethical consumer choices.