



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Women of Viharsarok: Peasant Women's Labour Activism in 1890s Hungary*

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Abstract

This article explores peasant women's labour activism in 1890s Hungary, in the southeastern part of the Habsburg Empire, where repeated harvesters' strikes and peasant uprisings took place during the second half of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries, making it the first centre of agrarian workers' socialist organizing in Hungary. Informed by a more inclusive approach to women's activist histories and subaltern studies, this article develops a new perspective on the periodization and geography of the international and Hungarian history of women's social movements, to contribute to the historiographies of peasant women's labour activism in the Eastern European countryside.

This article explores peasant women's labour activism in 1890s Hungary, which arose in so-called Viharsarok (the Stormy Corner) in the southeastern part of the Habsburg Empire.¹ The counties of Csanád, Csongrád, and Békés became known as “stormy” because of repeated harvesters' strikes and peasant uprisings that took place there

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¹The term Viharsarok (the Stormy Corner) was coined by the well-known Hungarian author-journalist Géza Féja (1900–1978) in the title of his sociographic novel, *Viharsarok: Az Alsó-Tiszavidék földje és népe* (Stormy Corner: The Lands and Peoples of the Lower Tisza Region) about the living conditions of poor peasants in southeastern Hungary, published in 1937. Although my title is idiosyncratic, the Hungarian historiography of the region's agrarian socialist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries written between the 1960s and the 1980s used the term Viharsarok. To this day, the term is still broadly applied to the region. This and all other translations from the Hungarian are the author's.

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during the second half of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century. The region was the first centre of agrarian workers' socialist organizing in Hungary. Informed by recent moves towards a more inclusive approach to women's activist histories, and building on the longer tradition of subaltern studies, this article offers new insights for the history of women's labour activism. Peasant women's labour activism in the Eastern European countryside has remained under-developed in the historiography of women's movements and labour activism. Uncovering the participation of peasant women in the agrarian socialist movement in 1890s Hungary, and engaging in its inclusive aspects, this article develops a new perspective on the periodization and geography of the international and Hungarian history of women's social movements and contributes to feminist historiographies of women's activism and subaltern history.

In this article, I distinguish between two phases of peasant women's labour activism in Viharsarok in the 1890s, which involve two distinct forms of organizing and two different clusters of women activists with different political leanings. I emphasize that peasant women's labour activism is only marginally present in official documents. Concerning the first phase, between 1890 and 1894, I show that the authorities and the contemporary national and local news media focused on those aspects of peasant women's labour activism that were considered highly inappropriate in terms of accepted gendered norms of behaviour at the time, such as their participation in mass protests. Sensationalist news reports and the one-sided discourse about peasant women's "loud" and "aggressive" activist behaviour contributed to discrediting the agrarian socialist movement as a whole. The historiography of agrarian socialism written in the period between the 1960s and the 1980s reproduces both the marginalization of peasant women's labour activism and its one-sided characterization. By using other sources, like former activists' recollections, I show that peasant women took part in the planning and execution of a variety of organized activities that were supported by the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, MSZDP). Beyond their participation in protests that were reported on by the press and documented by the authorities, the bulk of women's labour activism included tasks like cleaning the association building, sewing the association flag, and singing in the association choir. Peasant women's participation in these activities, despite generally following the patterns of the gendered division of labour at the time, did not reify traditional gender roles. Women's presence in and contribution to the men-dominated agrarian workers' socialist associations constitute what I would call transgressive behaviour.

In the second phase of agrarian socialist activism in Viharsarok between 1897 and the early 1900s, women formed separate women's structures within agrarian socialist organizations because of the more egalitarian character of the independent social democratic movement. They formulated a variety of women-specific labour agendas and addressed the need for peasant women to join the ranks of the movement. Unacknowledged in the national and European historiography of women's social movements, they were the first women labour activists in late nineteenth-century Hungary to highlight both the poor remuneration and inhumane treatment of men and women agrarian labourers and the special position of agrarian women performing both wage work and care work.

For my analysis of the first phase of women's activism, I primarily relied on authorities' reports, local newspapers, the summary of court hearings related to one of the largest uprisings in Viharsarok, and a male activist's recollections. For the second phase, I used articles written by peasant women themselves and published in the newspaper of the independent social democratic movement, later the Independent Socialist Party (Független Szocialista Párt), *Földművelő*.² It was not only the very first paper addressed exclusively to agrarian labourers, but also the first edited by a woman, Mariska Várkonyi, who actively encouraged peasant women to establish their own separate women-only structures. Both the newspaper and its woman editor were novel developments in Hungary at that time.³ Women's contributions to the paper totalled fifty-five announcements and articles published between 1896 and 1900, most of which were published in 1897. In that year, reports about newly established women's groups appeared in the paper on an almost weekly basis. The women's announcements provide a rich source for analysis because, in contrast to similar texts authored by men, which, in most cases, provided information only about the officers and membership numbers of their organizations, women often described why they felt it was necessary to engage in socialist activism. I read these sources using an inclusive approach and from a subaltern studies perspective.

The Marginalization of Peasant Women's Labour Activism in the Historiography of Gender and Labour

Both the international and the Hungarian historiography of women's movements and activism foregrounding gender over other categories of analysis has often marginalized lower- and working-class women's activisms, and peasant women in particular have been almost completely ignored until very recently.⁴ Key publications on Eastern European gender history include a minority of lower- and working-class women activists and only rarely refer to peasant women.⁵ When

²Between 29 August 1896 and the end of January 1899, *Földművelő* was published in Budapest, and from then until 1904 in Hódmezővásárhely, one of the towns of Viharsarok.

³Mariska Várkonyi (1878–1924), a writer and the editor of *Földművelő* between 1896 and 1899, was not the first woman newspaper editor in Hungary, but her forerunners, such as the famous writer and publicist Emilia Kánya (1830–1905), addressed middle-class women audiences. Várkonyi was among the first women in fin-de-siècle Hungary to consciously combine a gender and class egalitarian perspective, in an effort to articulate and improve the situation of poor agrarian labourers. Her series of essays entitled "Through the Eyes of a Woman", published in one of the most popular national opposition papers, *Egyetértés*, in the late 1890s, as well as her article entitled "About the Women Comrades" published in the 11 June 1897 issue of *Földművelő*, testify to her sensitivity to the problems of peasant women workers. On Mariska Várkonyi's labour activism, see József Farkas, "Várkonyi Mariska, ama földosztó Várkonyi leánya", *Békési Élet*, 17 (1982), pp. 299–312; and Eszter Varsa, "'Through the Eyes of a Woman': Agrarian Socialist Labour Activist Mariska Várkonyi in 1890s–1900s Hungary", under review.

⁴Selin Çağatay *et al.* "Women's Labour Struggles in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond: Toward a Long-Term, Transregional, Integrative, and Critical Approach", in Selin Çağatay *et al.* (eds), *Through the Prism of Gender and Work: Women's Labour Struggles in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond, 19th to 20th Centuries* (Leiden, 2023), pp. 1–80.

⁵Francisca de Haan *et al.* (eds), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (Budapest, 2006).

gender scholarship on Eastern Europe discusses agrarian women workers, it often prioritizes Russian women's socialist activism without addressing other Eastern European contexts and labour movements.⁶ On the rare occasions that peasant women's activism has been discussed in the gender history of Eastern Europe, it has been done with reference to the twentieth century, and the predominant focus has been on peasant women's participation in the Russian Revolution of 1917.⁷ The majority of existing studies on the Bolshevik movement in Russia focus on working-class women activists and mention peasant women's demands only in passing.⁸ In Hungarian scholarship, written from the perspective of the activities and organizing of middle-class feminists, peasant women were accorded, at best, an auxiliary role.⁹

The history of labour has traditionally foregrounded the category of class and focused on men workers' activists.¹⁰ A significant and largely ignored body of literature on the labour movement in Eastern Europe originated between the 1950s and 1980s in state-socialist countries. The substantial scholarship that developed at the time about agrarian socialism and the agrarian labour movement provides rich detail on left-wing activism among poor and landless peasants, yet fails to address, beyond sporadic references, the involvement of women.¹¹ For example, despite the sudden and, due to their sheer number, conspicuous appearance of announcements by women in *Földművelő* in 1897, except for a few mentions, there is hardly any discussion of them in the Hungarian historiography of agrarian socialism.¹²

At the same time, peasant labour, including women's agrarian labour, has become an established field of research.¹³ In global labour history, subaltern historians have placed peasants at the centre of their research. Case studies on India have revealed peasants as agents and contributors to historical development, a characterization that enables the

⁶Katalin Fábán *et al.* (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (New York, 2021).

⁷Barbara Evans Clements, "Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917–1923", *Signs*, 8 (1982), pp. 215–235.

⁸Anna Hillyar and Jane McDerimid, *Revolutionary Women in Russia, 1870–1917: A Study in Collective Biography* (Manchester [etc], 2000), p. 127.

⁹Dóra Czeferner, *Kultúrmisszó vagy propaganda? Feminista lapok és olvasóik Bécsben és Budapesten* (Budapest, 2021).

¹⁰Çağatay *et al.*, "Women's Labour Struggles"; Eloisa Betti *et al.*, "Introduction: Thinking the History of Women's Activism into Global Labour History", in *idem* (eds), *Women, Work, and Activism: Chapters of an Inclusive History of Labour in the Long Twentieth Century* (Budapest, 2022), pp. 1–31.

¹¹Susan Zimmermann, "The Agrarian Working Class Put Somewhat Centre Stage: An Often Neglected Group of Workers in the Historiography of Labour in State-Socialist Hungary", *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 25 (2018), pp. 79–100.

¹²There were two short essays that called for further research, but no such works followed: Oszkár Koszorús, "Forrásszemelvények az orosházi nőmunkásmozgalom kezdeti szakaszából", *Békési Élet*, 2 (1981), pp. 163–169; Ferenc Szabó, "A szocialista nőmozgalom kezdetei a Viharsarokban", *Honismeret*, 3 (1975), pp. 12–14. Historian József Farkas has paid special attention to Mariska Várkonyi's role in the independent social democratic movement.

¹³Zimmermann, "The Agrarian Working Class", pp. 83–88.

deconstruction of hegemonic power relations and challenges the Eurocentric bias in modern imperial history.¹⁴ The term “subaltern citizen” as defined by Gyanendra Pandey, expresses the potential that “the subaltern possesses (or the threat s/he poses) of becoming a full member of the community”.¹⁵ A focus on the subaltern as a “disturbing element” exposes relations of dominance and subordination and the ensuing struggle to change these relations, and enables a reading of history against the grain.¹⁶

The historiography on women workers’ activism written in the countries of state-socialist Europe between the 1950s and 1980s has devoted considerable attention to women’s roles in the history of the socialist and communist pre-state-socialist women’s and workers’ movements and women revolutionary figures.¹⁷ Scholarship specifically addressing women’s labour, however, has primarily considered industrial working women’s lives.¹⁸ With a few exceptions, such as Susan Zimmermann’s and Judit Acsády and Zsolt Mészáros’s analyses of the cross-class activism of the peasant women of Balmazújváros, neither the older scholarship nor the literature devoted to women’s labour that has been written since the 1990s (after the regime change) discusses agrarian contexts.¹⁹

The labour activism of agrarian working women in the late nineteenth century has not only been barely discussed in the Hungarian scholarship, but it has also been largely ignored in the broader history of European women’s (labour) activism. The Hungarian countryside is thus under-explored territory in this history. Existing scholarship has so far addressed peasant women’s activism in the context of the history of anarchism among agrarian workers with emphasis on Southern Italy and Spain. These works are significant because they approach labour activism from an inclusive perspective: they identify (peasant) women’s spheres of labour, communal protests, and female neighbourhood networks as sites and forms of labour activism. As Jennifer Guglielmo has posited, “[clearly], we must look into the kitchen and see

¹⁴Adrian Grama and Susan Zimmermann, “The Art of Link-Making in Global Labour History: Subaltern, Feminist and Eastern European Contributions”, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 25 (2018), pp. 1–20; Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1 (2000), 9–32.

¹⁵Gyanendra Pandey, “Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories”, *Interventions*, 10 (2008), pp. 271–284, 275.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹⁷Alexandra Ghit, “Professionals’ and Amateurs’ Pasts: A Decolonizing Reading of Post-War Romanian Histories of Gendered Interwar Activism”, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 25 (2018), pp. 21–44; Susan Zimmermann, “In and Out of the Cage: Women’s and Gender History Written in Hungary in the State-Socialist Period”, *Aspasia*, 8 (2014), pp. 125–149.

¹⁸Magda Aranyossi, *Lázadó asszonyok. A magyar nőmunkásmozgalom története, 1867–1919* (Budapest, 1963); Zsuzsa Fonó, *A magyarországi szocialista nőmozgalom történetéhez, 1895–1918 (A mozgalom és a szociális összetétel konfliktusai)* (Budapest, 1975); Zsuzsa Fonó, *A magyar munkásnők helyzete és szervezetsége a két világháború között* (Budapest, 1978).

¹⁹Judit Acsády, “Women’s Industrial Labor in Hungary: An Overview of Main Tendencies and Turning Points from the End of the Nineteenth Century”, *East Central Europe*, 46 (2019), pp. 6–28. For an analysis of the cross-class activism of the women of Balmazújváros, see Susan Zimmermann, “Female Agrarian Workers in Early Twentieth-Century Hungary: The Making of Class- and Gender-Based Solidarities”, *Aspasia*, 12 (2018), pp. 121–133; Judit Acsády and Zsolt Mészáros, “A Balmazújvárosi Szabad Nőszervezet és a Feministák Egyesülete közötti kapcsolat (1908–1929). A női szolidaritás megnyilvánulásai a hazai feminista mozgalomban”, *TNTeF*, 8 (2018), pp. 80–96.

what these women were doing in the background spaces”, in order to counter the inherited notion of lower-class women’s lack of participation in the labour movement.²⁰ Addressing poor peasant women’s role in the wave of uprisings that spread from rural southern Italy across the whole country beginning in the 1890s, and in the local labour struggles of immigrant women in New York City between the late nineteenth century and the mid-1940s, Guglielmo shows that the invisibility of women in the historical documents on labour organizing and activism does not mean that they were apolitical and did not contribute to these movements. On the contrary, “there existed another world, where Italian women formulated strategies of resistance and survival that called into question systems of power and authority within their families, communities, and the larger society”.²¹ Similarly, researching rural migrant women’s roles in labour activism and collective action in early twentieth-century Veracruz and in the anarchist movements of Spain, Heather Fowler-Salamini and Temma Kaplan, respectively, have highlighted the connection between working-class women’s spheres of work and roles in their communities as well as their participation and agendas in mass strikes and other forms of collective action.²² “Female consciousness”, which Kaplan identifies as women’s sense of rights and obligations that emerges out of the gendered division of labour “assign [ing] women the responsibility of preserving life”, takes political shape and serves as women’s motivation for activism in a variety of movements.²³ Women’s discourse in labour activism is also “more directly related to the survival of the household” than the demands of their men comrades.²⁴ Despite the fact that Eastern Europe as a whole had an overwhelmingly agrarian population at the time organized social movements emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, there have not been any studies systematically analysing peasant women’s (labour) activism to date. Therefore, building on an inclusive and subaltern studies approach to labour history, I show that contrary to the limited appearance of women in authorities’ reports and in the existing historiography of labour and gender, peasant women were active and formulated their own agendas in the organized agrarian socialist movement of late nineteenth-century Hungary.

The Position of Poor Peasant Women in Late Nineteenth-Century Hungary

In the Hungarian part of the Habsburg Monarchy, agriculture provided a living for over sixty per cent of the population.²⁵ A major source of social tension from the

²⁰Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010), p. 3.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

²²Temma Kaplan, “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910–1918”, *Signs*, 7 (1982), pp. 545–566; *idem*, “Community and Resistance in Women’s Political Cultures”, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 15 (1990), pp. 259–267; Heather Fowler-Salamini, “Women Coffee Sorters Confront the Mill Owners and the Veracruz Revolutionary State, 1915–1918”, *Journal of Women’s History*, 14 (2002), pp. 34–63.

²³Kaplan, “Female Consciousness”, p. 545.

²⁴Fowler-Salamini, “Women Coffee Sorters”, p. 47.

²⁵Ignác Romsics, “The Peasantry and the Age of Revolutions: Hungary, 1918–1919”, *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 35 (1989), pp. 113–133.

second half of the nineteenth century onwards arose due to the increasingly unequal distribution of land. Although peasants were liberated from serfdom and land redistribution followed the 1848–1849 Hungarian Revolution, so-called allodial land remained in the hands of large landowners.²⁶ Former serfs could acquire only small plots with the help of state loans. In 1870, fifty-seven per cent of agrarian plots were in the hands of large landowners.²⁷ While their ratio varied per region, the high number of the landless and pauperized among the rural population and the “polarization of land division between small property and great property” were a serious problem.²⁸ In the town of Orosháza, one of the first centres of agrarian socialist organizing in Viharsarok, there were 1,550 heads of peasant households that owned no land in 1890, while a further 2,277 owned less than ten hectares, which was too small to make a living.²⁹

The period between the 1880s and World War I saw rapid economic development and Hungary’s transformation to capitalism. Large estates characterized by labour-intensive cultivation and old technologies became unprofitable, leading to enclosure and the leasing out of land with rising rents. Estate owners and lessors introduced new methods of farming involving a greater reliance on machinery. While large landholders could purchase more land, small landholders, who were also charged higher taxes, could no longer earn a living from their plots.³⁰ These changes drove a growing number of landless and smallholder peasants into wage labour.³¹ The two most common types of agrarian wage labourers in the Viharsarok region were servants (*uradalmi cseléd, béres*) and day labourers (*napszámos*). These groups included peasant women labourers, too. Servants formed a special group of agrarian labourers because they lived on the estates and farms (*tanya, puszta*) of large landholders and wealthy land-owning peasants, making them more dependent on their employers than were day labourers. Their working conditions were initially regulated by Act 13 of 1876 (or the Servants’ Act),³² which stipulated the subordinate relationship of servants to their owners. Although the act provided servants with certain rights, such as leaving their workplace if their “life, health or physical safety was endangered”, they could

²⁶Ferenc Pölöskei and Kálmán Szakács (eds), *Földmunkás- és szegényparaszt-mozgalmak Magyarországon 1848–1948*, vol. 1 (Budapest, 1962); Péter Gunst, *Hungarian Agrarian Society from the Emancipation of Serfs (1848) to the Reprivatization of Land (1998)* (Boulder, CO [etc.], 1998).

²⁷Gábor Demeter, *Agrarian Transformations in Southeastern Europe (from the Late 18th Century to World War II)*, Publications of the Bulgarian-Hungarian History Commission (Sofia, 2017), p. 34. One hectare equals 10,000 square metres or 2.471 acres. Owners of more than fifty hectares of land counted as large landowners.

²⁸Irina Marin, “Rural Social Combustibility in Eastern Europe (1880–1914): A Cross-Border Perspective”, *Rural History* 28 (2017), pp. 93–113, 99. See also *idem*, *Peasant Violence and Antisemitism in Early Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cham, 2018).

²⁹Ferenc Szabó, “A kiegyezéstől az első világháborúig, 1867–1914”, in Gyula Nagy (ed.), *Orosháza története* (Orosháza, 1965), pp. 404–559, 419.

³⁰Pölöskei and Szakács, *Földmunkás- és szegényparaszt-mozgalmak*, vol. 1, pp. 107–138.

³¹Gunst, *Hungarian Agrarian Society*.

³²1876. évi XIII. törvénycikk a cseléd és gazda közötti viszony szabályozásáról, a gazdasági munkásokról és a napszámosokról. Available at <https://net.jogtar.hu/getpdf?docid=87600013.TV&targetdate=&printTitle=1876.+%C3%A9vi+XIII.+t%C3%B6rv%C3%A9nycikk&referer=1000ev>; last accessed 1 February 2024.

hardly claim them in practice due to limited work opportunities; furthermore, the contentious issue of working hours remained unregulated.³³

There were two main categories of servants, distinguished by the form of payment they received: those whose remuneration included food (*konvenció*), and those whose did not. Servants with *konvenció* mostly worked on large estates with their families and had to perform *corvée* (*robot*) in the form of an annually set number of days of labour in return for the provision of housing and livestock.³⁴ *Corvée* mostly involved tasks performed by women.³⁵ The remuneration that servants received was partly in kind and partly in cash. In Hódmezővásárhely, for example, until the 1860s it was quite common that women servants received only in-kind payment, which was usually items of clothing and a pair of boots.³⁶ Cash payments, from which any damages were deducted, were one quarter to a third less for women servants than for men. Full wages were only paid to young men and women older than sixteen who had to perform adult labour.³⁷ In-kind food payments usually barely covered the needs of families; consequently, among the main grounds for servants' strikes were the poor quality of flour and bacon workers received as well as being cheated out of the full amount of provisions by the dishonest personnel of landowners responsible for weighing and distributing these items.³⁸

Day labourers formed the largest group among the village poor; they performed seasonal agricultural work for in-kind and cash payments based on yearly contractual agreements. Cash payments differed according to season, gender, and age. No matter the season, women's pay was fifty to sixty per cent less than that of men. Day labourers who did not receive *konvenció* were allotted, on average, one tenth or one eleventh of the harvested product, and those who did received one thirteenth of the crop. These payments differed, however, according to region and season.³⁹

A much-contested issue that served as an important ground for harvester strikes and also became one of the central questions of the agrarian socialist movement concerned harvesting contracts. These agreements were usually brokered at the beginning of the year for a variety of harvesting tasks, but they obliged peasants to be at the disposal of their employers for different types of seasonal agricultural work throughout the entire year. This allowed landowners and leaseholders to extract exploitative profits from peasants.⁴⁰ Additionally, the growing use of machines for land cultivation and harvesting shortened seasonal employment periods and significantly reduced the earnings of peasants. These changes affected

³³Pölöskei and Szakács, *Földmunkás- és szegényparasztmozgalmak*, vol. 1, pp. 139–141; Martha Lampland, "Corvée, Maps and Contracts: Agricultural Policy and the Rise of the Modern State in Hungary during the Nineteenth Century", *Irish Journal of Anthropology*, 3 (1998), pp. 7–40, 21–22.

³⁴Lampland, "Corvée, Maps and Contracts"; Aranyossi, *Lázadó asszonyok*, p. 13.

³⁵Aranyossi, *Lázadó asszonyok*, p. 13.

³⁶Lajos Kiss, *A szegény ember élete* (Budapest, 1934); *idem*, *A szegény asszony élete* (Budapest, 1939).

³⁷Pölöskei and Szakács, *Földmunkás- és szegényparasztmozgalmak*, vol. 1., p. 144.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Pölöskei and Szakács, *Földmunkás- és szegényparasztmozgalmak*, vol. 1.

women's lives adversely because not only were men's wages no longer adequate to raise a family but, due to the significantly worse remuneration women received, the family income was also an insufficient living. Furthermore, women, who were responsible for providing most of the childcare-related work, struggled with the consequences of having to perform day labour, as it meant leaving their children unattended.

The Rise of Agrarian Socialism in Late Nineteenth-Century Hungary

The 1890s saw the rise of two waves of agrarian workers' labour activism, including large uprisings of several thousand participants ending in bloodshed, both servants and day labourers' harvesting strikes, and open and underground socialist organizing, all of which were centred in Viharsarok. In her comparative analysis of rural social combustibility in southeastern Europe between the late nineteenth century and World War I, Irina Marin underlines that uprisings occurred due to a "complex of factors" that were more powerful than peasants' "self-preservation instinct, fear of reprisal and concern for daily business".⁴¹

Concerning the reasons for Viharsarok becoming the first centre of peasants' uprisings in Hungary, historian Ferenc Szabó has argued that, in nineteenth-century Orosháza, each generation had their own experiences of clashes with landowners and state authorities.⁴² Orosháza and some of the other towns in Viharsarok already stood out during the 1848–1849 Hungarian Revolution, when poor peasants began redistributing and occupying the lands of their owners before the liberation of serfs in 1848 and caused a sort of revolution when these lands were taken back following the Habsburg king's suppression of the revolution.⁴³ Despite the scarcity of available sources concerning women, those that exist suggest that they were already active participants in these early struggles: for example, Mrs István Tüske Zsuzsanna Antali, a widow, led a group of starving peasants during a hunger riot in Orosháza in 1863.⁴⁴

The two phases of peasant women's labour activism in Viharsarok in the 1890s corresponded to the two phases of men-dominated agrarian workers' socialist activism. The first phase was primarily supported by the MSZDP. Male workers started their social democratic agitation in the region in the late 1880s and formed their first organizations in 1890, when the MSZDP was founded. The demands of this first wave of activism concerned improvements in working conditions and wage increases, including an increase in the remuneration of harvesters and the termination of *corvée*. Some workers' groups, such as the one led by János Szántó Kovács in Hódmezővásárhely, also called for more egalitarian land

⁴¹Marin, "Rural Social Combustibility", p. 95.

⁴²Ferenc Szabó, "A Viharsarokban megindított szervező munka kiterjedése az 1890-es évek elején", in János Rácz (ed.), *Szántó Kovács János születésének 125. évfordulójára* (Hódmezővásárhely, 1977), pp. 29–33, 32.

⁴³Imre Katona, "Az első véres május 1-e a Viharsarokban", in Gyula Nagy (ed.), *Emlékkönyv hazánk felszabadulásának és az orosházi Szántó Kovács Múzeum fennállásának 10 éves évfordulójára* (Orosháza, 1955), pp. 175–196, 176.

⁴⁴Koszorús, "Forrásszemelvények", pp. 163–169; Péter Simon, *A századforduló földmunkás- és szegényparaszt-mozgalmai, 1891–1907* (Budapest, 1953).

distribution.⁴⁵ The MSZDP's Budapest party centre, as well as its local bureau in Arad (Arad, Romania), supported this phase of peasant organizing in Viharsarok, but peasants also mobilized among themselves – outside a formal party structure – across the region.⁴⁶

The first major peasant uprisings in late nineteenth-century Hungary took place in Orosháza and Békéscsaba on 1 and 2 May 1891, when the magistrate and gendarmerie sought to prevent 1 May celebrations among peasants, and the authorities refused to legalize the local workers' association. Another uprising followed in Battonya on 21 June 1891 after authorities ignored peasants' demands for an increase in remuneration and the abolition of *corvée*. Following the arrest of many participants in these events and the introduction of curfew in the region of Orosháza, the centre of organizing shifted to Hódmezővásárhely in 1892. Soon, the town became known internationally for the János Szántó Kovács-led uprising of 22 April 1894.⁴⁷ Here, angry crowds attacked the town hall following the confiscation of readings and propaganda materials from the workers' association and the arrest of Szántó Kovács. After these events, a state of siege was declared, and harsh government retaliation followed, including the imprisonment of the male leaders of the organization. Socialist activists among the peasants were brutally treated across the counties of Viharsarok and in other regions in central Hungary where authorities registered such activism. The MSZDP stepped back from advocating the cause of poor agrarian workers, fearing the consequences of such revolts for their organization, and the movement went underground.⁴⁸

The emergence of a second wave of activism within only three years of this suppression was, to a large extent, connected to the fact that the MSZDP withdrew their support for peasants.⁴⁹ In response to this abandonment, István Várkonyi (1852–1918), initially an MSZDP member, reacted to agrarian workers' efforts to organize by founding *Földművelő* in the summer of 1896 and supporting peasants' demands for the improvement of their living and working conditions. With Várkonyi's aid, another generation of men peasant activists began forming their first trade-union-like organizations in 1895–1896. One of the main concerns of Várkonyi and his supporters was the unionization of agrarian workers and the creation of a more independent organizational structure. Várkonyi saw unions as the precondition for achieving better remuneration for agrarian labour and the abolition of *corvée* and other exploitative elements of the prevailing land rent

⁴⁵István Király, "Az 1891-es agrárszocialista mozgalom és az 1905–1906. évi dunántúli arató- és cselédsztrájkok összehasonlítása", *Agrártörténeti Szemle*, 22 (1980), pp. 311–353, 317; András Bozóki and Miklós Sükösd, *Anarchism in Hungary: Theory, History, Legacies* (Boulder, CO [etc], 2005), p. 73.

⁴⁶Simon, *A századforduló földmunkás- és szegényparaszt-mozgalmai*, p. 39.

⁴⁷Magyar Munkásmozgalmi Intézet (ed.), *A magyar munkásmozgalom történetének válogatott dokumentumai* (hereafter MMTVD), vol. 1. *A magyar munkásmozgalom kialakulása* (Budapest, 1951), p. 278. Friedrich Engels referred to the case of the uprising and peasants' violent clash with authorities at Hódmezővásárhely in a letter dated 15 May 1894, which was addressed to the third congress of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party. In German, originally published in *Arbeiterpresse*, 18 May 1894; in Hungarian, in *Népszava* on the same day.

⁴⁸Pölöskei and Szakács, *Földmunkás- és szegényparasztmozgalmak*, vol. 1.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

system.⁵⁰ When he was excluded from the MSZDP in early 1897 as a consequence of his views, he – with the support of his followers – founded the independent social democratic movement, which from September of the same year was named the Independent Socialist Party.⁵¹ Based on the Swiss model of cantons, agrarian workers' unions were to provide a more egalitarian organizational structure than that of the MSZDP.⁵² They enabled local members to influence party decision-making and become functionaries within the organization. The announcements in *Földművelő* about these newly established organizations and separate women's groups show that about one third of the members had organizational roles, including two to three presidents and treasurers.

The Várkonyi movement differed from the MSZDP-supported activism in its openness to more radical repertoires of action and anarchist and messianic thought.⁵³ During its peak, in 1897, independent socialist activism resulted in a series of successful harvesting strikes, while numerous separate women's structures were founded within the mixed-gender organizations.⁵⁴ Importantly, agrarian workers – including women – remained active in and kept in touch with both the MSZDP and the independent socialists, especially as the former increased its agitation among peasants, fearing a loss of support in the countryside following Várkonyi's successes. However, just one year later, in 1898, the movement faced harsh government retaliation: the banning of *Földművelő*, the imprisonment of Várkonyi, and the introduction of Act 2 of 1898,⁵⁵ which aimed to prevent further waves of strikes by creating several new, more restrictive conditions for the employment of agrarian workers, including severe penal sanctions for breach of contract.

While in the first phase of activism up to 1894, peasant women predominantly engaged in mixed-gender organizations, from 1897 onwards, many of them were active in separate women's groups that were part of these larger organizations, articulating the women-specific aspects and hardships of the working and living conditions of agrarian labourers. In the following pages, I discuss the agendas and repertoires of action of peasant women labour activists as they emerged and changed across the two phases of the agrarian socialist labour movement in Viharsarok.

⁵⁰Kálmán Szakács, "Első kísérlet a földmunkás szakszervezet megalakítására (1896–1900)", *Párttörténeti Közlemények*, 3 (1969), pp. 70–95.

⁵¹József Farkas, *Agrárszocialista mozgalmak* (Szeged, 1968), pp. 31–36.

⁵²Várkonyi was also the first socialist politician in Hungary who won the support of leaders of national minorities through this more egalitarian form of organizing. The Independent Socialist Party embraced their goal for greater national sovereignty. József Farkas, "Agrárszocializmus és nemzeti kérdés a Délvidéken a XIX. század végén", *Párttörténeti közlemények*, 33 (1987), pp. 168–198.

⁵³Messianic thought means a belief in and the expectation of a redeemer and savior (messiah) figure. Messianic thought was widespread among peasants in Hungary at the time. Bozóki and Sükösd, *Anarchism in Hungary*, pp. 70–75.

⁵⁴Farkas, *Agrárszocialista mozgalmak*, pp. 36–40.

⁵⁵1898. évi II. Törvénycikk. A munkaadók és mezőgazdasági munkások közötti jogviszony szabályozásáról. Available at <https://net.jogtar.hu/getpdf?docid=89800002.TV&targetdate=&printTitle=1898.+%C3%A9vi+II.+t%C3%B6rv%C3%A9nycikk&referer=1000ev>; last accessed 1 February 2024.

“Women Workers! [Join] under the Red Banner!” The First Group of Women Activists, 1891–1894

Peasant women’s labour organizing in the 1890s predated both industrial working-class women’s and feminist women’s organizations in Hungary, which developed in urban contexts. While the predominantly middle-class women’s trade-union-like organization of women employees was established in Budapest in 1897, the first women’s organization representing members of the industrial working classes appeared in the capital city only in 1903, followed by the founding of the Feminists’ Association (Feministák Egyesülete) a year later. Peasant women were not the first among the working-classes in Hungary to articulate the problems arising out of women’s participation in both productive and reproductive work,⁵⁶ but they played a pioneering role in addressing the poor remuneration and inhumane treatment of the masses of agricultural poor as well as issues related to peasant women’s unpaid work. In the following section, I discuss the limited appearance of peasant women’s labour activism in authorities’ reports and show that this absence does not mean women’s lack of interest or participation in the organized agrarian socialist movement. I then reflect on the transgressive character of peasant women’s labour activism, which was not restricted to their much-sensationalized contribution to (spontaneous) mass protests but mainly entailed gender-specific tasks related to the everyday aspects of associational life.

Women are hard to detect in the available documents related to agrarian socialist activism produced by the authorities in late nineteenth-century Hungary. Subaltern scholarship has grappled with the problem of the lack of sources about marginalized groups and especially members of peasant societies on the global periphery. In an effort to “write the history, histories of [...] groups and people who didn’t leave behind documents”, subaltern historians have examined texts produced by the ruling classes as “artefacts in which ‘social power relationships were encoded’”.⁵⁷ Postcolonial historian Ann Laura Stoler has focused specifically on the way archives symbolize the power structure between the non-white periphery and the hegemonic centre. Approaching archives as “sites of knowledge production” instead of “sites of knowledge retrieval”, she has decoded the “technologies of rule” in the production of documents. Stoler has proposed “reading along the archival grain”, that is, examining “the social and political conditions that produced [...] documents”, including the “conditions of possibility that shaped what could be written, what warranted repetition, what competencies were rewarded in archival writing, what stories could not be told, and what could not be said”.⁵⁸ Gayatri Spivak has emphasized the need for deconstructing normative narratives with attention to the gender hierarchies at work in the representation of the “female

⁵⁶Susan Zimmermann, *Die bessere Hälfte? Frauenbewegungen und Frauenbestrebungen im Ungarn der Habsburgermonarchie 1848 bis 1918* (Vienna [etc], 1999), p. 25.

⁵⁷Gramma and Zimmermann, “The Art of Link-Making”, p. 5.

⁵⁸Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance”, *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), pp. 87–109, 101; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2009).

subaltern”.⁵⁹ Feminist historians, including labour historians, have discussed different aspects of the intersecting gender and class hierarchies related to the reasons for the silences around lower-class women in official documents. Several scholars have, for example, problematized the use of language in official records that does not mention women and describes gatherings and protests as if only men were present.⁶⁰ While textual sources in German pose a challenge in that they use male (plural) forms to refer to women and men – such as “workers” (*Arbeiter*), in Hungarian, nouns are not gendered. It is only from other, for example, ethnographic sources that one may come to know that when documents mention a strike of “harvesters”, it must refer to both men and women because harvesting was performed by men and women working as couples.⁶¹ Another manifestation of gendered hierarchies intersecting with class is authorities’ self-explanatory identification of men workers with militant actions. Writing about a strike at a linen factory in late nineteenth-century Poland, Zhanna Popova has remarked that, even though women started the strike, only men were considered its initiators by the gendarmerie. She also posits that the reason only a few women were depicted in a crowd of male workers in an official photograph of the factory, even though one third of the workers were women, could have been related to the stigma that cast factory women as unfit mothers.⁶² Furthermore, mentioning the presence of women workers in strikes could also serve the purpose of disparaging or delegitimizing the strike.⁶³

The surviving archival sources concerning the early 1890s agrarian socialist movement in Viharsarok similarly reflect authorities’ focus on male activists. In the court proceedings following the uprising in Hódmezővásárhely in 1894, János Szántó Kovács was the centre of attention. It is only from brief remarks, such as a half-sentence reference to a woman in a report about the court hearing, that one can conclude that women, too, were members of the male-led socialist organization, and that they paid membership dues. The report on the case features a discussion between János Szántó Kovács and the president of the court about his association having failed to pay taxes on the membership dues collected. Accordingly, a Mrs Vincze was called to appear at the town hall on 15 April 1894 to show her association membership card, and Szántó Kovács and another member of the leadership accompanied her to show their support.⁶⁴ Reading along the archival grain in this case thus means reflecting on the gender

⁵⁹Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

⁶⁰Samita Sen, “Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890–1990”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 42 (January 2008), pp. 75–116; Veronika Helfert, “What Do Police Records Reveal? Looking for Striking Women Workers in October 1950, Austria”, ZARAH Blog Series I: Finding Women in the Archives. Available at: <https://zarah-ceu.org/what-do-police-records-reveal-looking-for-striking-women-workers-in-october-1950-austria/>; last accessed 1 February 2024.

⁶¹Helfert, “What Do Police Records Reveal?”

⁶²Zhanna Popova, “The Invisible Women: Żyrdarów Strike of 1883”, ZARAH Blog Series I: Finding Women in the Archives. Available at <https://zarah-ceu.org/the-invisible-women-zyrdarow-strike-of-1883/>; last accessed 1 February 2024.

⁶³Helfert, “What Do Police Records Reveal?”

⁶⁴*Népszava naptár 1896. szökö évre a magyar munkásnép számára* (Budapest, 1896), p. 150.

hierarchies at play that affected the production of documentation about the uprising. When archives are used purely “as a site of knowledge retrieval”, women end up being marginalized, as in the Hungarian historiography of agrarian socialist organizing.⁶⁵

The Transgressiveness of Peasant Women’s Labour Activism

Writing about men and women activists of the Comintern from a global historical perspective, Brigitte Studer has warned against reproducing the “gender-specific topography of relevance” of historical sources.⁶⁶ Analysing women’s food riots in Vienna during World War I, Veronika Helfert has drawn attention to the depoliticization of women’s public demonstrations in contemporary police reports and the characterization of women’s activism as an irrational expression of emotions.⁶⁷ Due to the identification of the public sphere as an exclusively male space, women’s presence in demonstrations was perceived as a transgression of the accepted gendered norms of behaviour and, thus, regarded as radical per se. Since rationality and strength were considered male attributes, women’s protest actions were understood to be apolitical even though, as Helfert shows, they had well-defined political goals.

The existing historiography of agrarian socialism in Hungary has uncritically taken on the focus and perspective of contemporary news reports and other administrative documents, which has led not only to the almost complete erasure of women from the historiography on this phase of labour activism in Hungary, but also to the misrepresentation of the nature of their engagement in it. Most of the available sources, including reports by state authorities and the contemporary press, make it appear as though women stood outside the framework of organized activism and were present only in spontaneously evolving mass demonstrations and uprisings. In local newspapers, women’s participation in such events was represented as exceedingly loud, uncontrolled, and destructive, thereby underscoring the exceptionality and irrationality of their activism. Some of the drawings depicting the events in Viharsarok, which appeared on the covers and front pages of the most popular national dailies, show that women prominently featured on the front lines during clashes with the gendarmerie and the army (see [Figure 1](#)).⁶⁸ The description of the events in

⁶⁵Stoler, “Colonial Archives”, p. 90.

⁶⁶Brigitte Studer, *Reisende der Weltrevolution. Eine Globalgeschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Berlin, 2020), p. 39. I thank Veronika Helfert for the English translation of the term *geschlechtsspezifische Relevanztopographie*.

⁶⁷Veronika Helfert, “Unter Anführung eines 13-jährigen Mädchens’. Gewalt und Geschlecht in unorganisierten Protestformen in Wien während des Ersten Weltkrieges”, *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, 2 (2014), pp. 66–82; *idem*, *Frauen, wacht auf! Eine Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte von Revolution und Rätebewegung in Österreich, 1916–1924* (Göttingen, 2021).

⁶⁸“Véres nap Orosházán”, *Kis Újság* cover image, 3 May 1891; “A békés-csabai zendülés: Katonák és munkások összetűzése”, *Kis Újság* cover image, 4 May 1891; “A battonyai zendülés: Ismét munkás vérontás”, *Kis Újság* cover image, 22 June 1891.

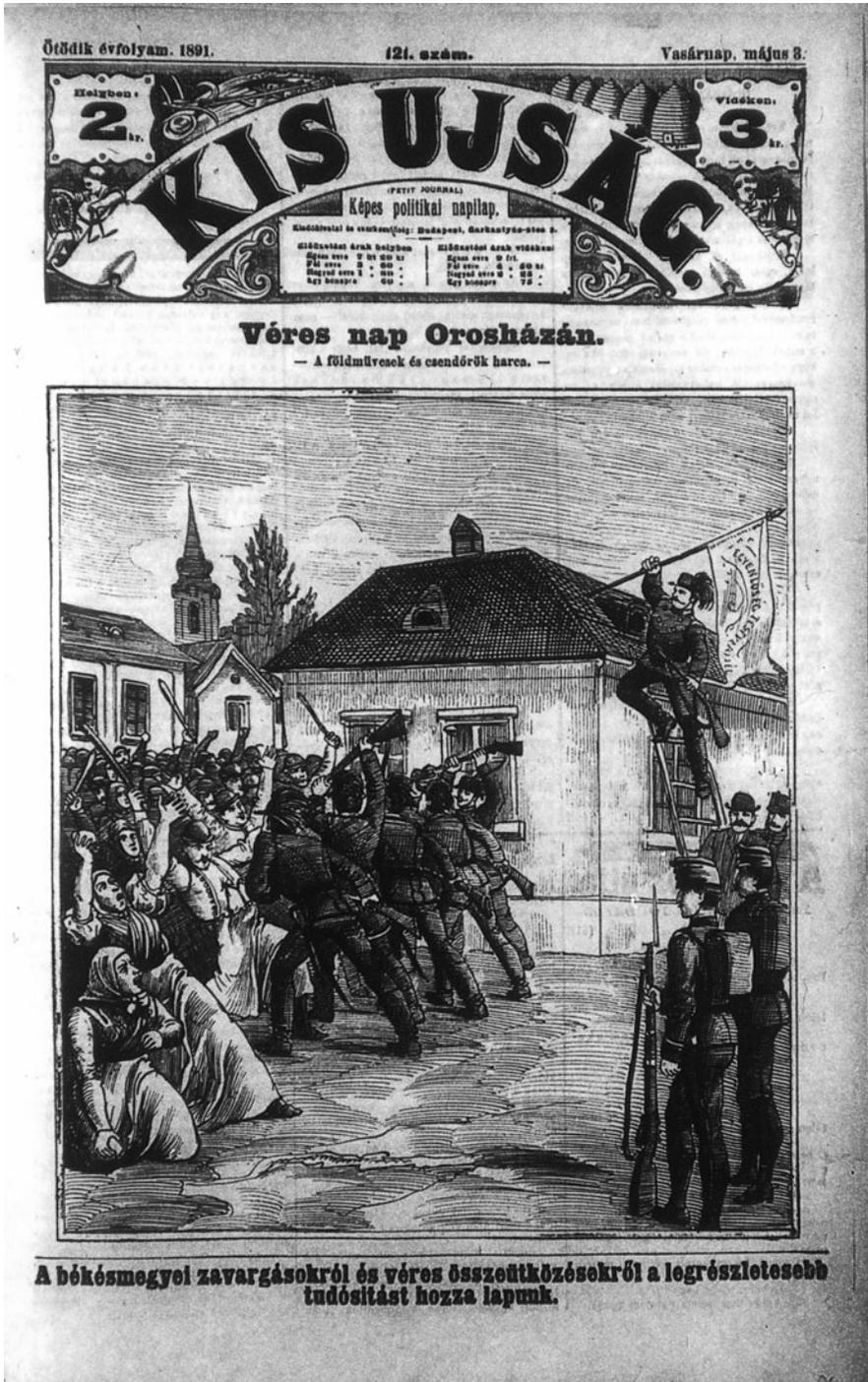


Figure 1. “Véres nap Orosházán: A földművesek és csendőrök harca”, *Kis Újság* cover image, 3 May 1891.

Orosháza that appeared in one of the local newspapers, a social, educational and economic weekly funded by the town administration, is a case in point. The reportage drew attention to a woman participant, Mrs Csöntör, who shouted: “I would rather die than leave before the flag [of the association] has been returned!” and scolded the crowd: “You cowards! You have let those thieves steal your flag!” Sensationalizing the contribution of an eighty-two-year-old woman to the events, the newspaper article also claimed that a Mrs Szabó had aggressively directed the crowd to break down the door of the magistrate’s office and was among the first to enter the building once the door had been breached, screaming: “Follow me, everybody! We either get hold of the flag, or we die here!”⁶⁹ The news report made clear that Mrs Szabó was not only the oldest woman participant, but that she also received the longest prison sentence – six months – of all the women involved. The details about these sentences included in the article indicate that there were numerous women who were present at and participated in the protest but who did not make it into authorities’ reports and were otherwise not highlighted by the sensationalist press coverage (see Table 1).

Similarly, much of the national dailies’ coverage of the Battonya and Hódmezővásárhely uprisings that identified women among the participants focused on their irrational and uncontrolled expression of emotions and destructive behaviour.⁷⁰ Vera Károly, who, it was claimed, was one of the three ringleaders at Battonya, has been portrayed as excessively aggressive, fiercely agitating among the crowd gathered at the town centre, demanding better remuneration and the abolition of corvée, shouting accusingly: “Are you not ashamed of yourselves for being the masters’ dogs? Beat them and tear them to pieces!”⁷¹ The explanatory part of the court sentence handed down to ten women out of a total of thirty-seven persons sentenced also highlighted women’s aggression.⁷² Addressing an attack at the town hall, which was carried out by a group of women led by, among others, Margit Károly,⁷³ the court stressed that these women managed to occupy the courtyard for four hours before the army could disperse them:

With heavy cursing, throwing of stones, and swearing, they stated that they would not leave the place until they received the ministerial decree granting their demands, wanting to take with them the district magistrate and the head of the gendarme, and among death threats, obscene scoffing and gestures, they were either throwing sticks from one direction or pieces of bricks from the other.⁷⁴

⁶⁹“Az orosházi munkás-lázadók elitélése”, *Orosházi Újság*, 20 September 1891, p. 2.

⁷⁰“A battonyai véres munkáslázadás”, *Kis Újság*, 23 June 1891, p. 4; Magyar Munkásmozgalmi Intézet (ed.), *MMTVD*, vol. 2, *A Magyar munkásmozgalom az imperializmusra való átmenet időszakában, 1890–1900* (Budapest, 1954), pp. 107–109.

⁷¹*MMTVD*, vol. 2, pp. 107–109.

⁷²An excerpt of the sentence, which does not list the names of all the women, is available in *MMTVD*, vol. 2, pp. 112–114.

⁷³It is not clear from the sources whether she was called Margit or Vera Károly.

⁷⁴*MMTVD*, vol. 2, p. 114.

Table 1. Names and ages of the women on trial following the Orosháza uprising. Their final prison sentence was passed down by the Békésgyula (Gyula) court on 24 May 1892.⁷⁵ The list includes women participants of the agrarian socialist movement whose names were left out of authorities' reports and have been forgotten in the history of women's and labour movements.

Name	Age	Prison sentence in months
Mrs J. Csömör ⁷⁶	46	n.d.
Mrs István Csöntör	n.d.	3
Mrs József Tóth Benedek	26	3
Mrs János Szabó	82	6
Katalin Máté	47	3
Mrs Bálint Karácsonyi	34	n.d.
Mrs András Kalapos	38	n.d.
Mrs Károly Dömötör	47	3
Mrs János Havasi	28	3
Mrs Antal Bollai	35	n.d.
Mrs Antal Bikádi	26	n.d.
Mária Vági	28	n.d.
Mrs Márton Bracsó Tóth	27	n.d.
Mrs Pál Virág	42	2
Mrs Péter Nagy	27	n.d.
Mrs Mihály Kvanka	32	n.d.
Mrs József Németh	n.d.	n.d.

A witness who was seventeen at the time of the events, and who was interviewed in 1966, recalled the women's unrestrained anger, describing how they had thrown all the furniture and books from the office of the district magistrate out onto the street.⁷⁷ In its coverage of the Hódmezővásárhely uprising, the local social and literary weekly *Vásárhely és Vidéke*, also funded by the local administration, highlighted the participation of Mari (Mária) Lukács from among the many men who had been arrested and claimed that she had attacked the crowd when it wanted

⁷⁵Based on "Kik voltak a zavargók május 1.-én", *Orosházi Újság*, 5 July 1891, p. 2 and "Mi újság?", *Orosházi Újság*, 15 May 1892, p. 2, the latter reprinted in István Forman (ed), *Válogatott dokumentumok az orosházi munkásmozgalom történetéből, 1868. október 4.–1944. október 6.* (Orosháza, 1984), p. 46. The 15 May 1892 news report, describing the court sentence that was to be passed down nine days later, mentioned that the court of first instance sentences from the autumn of 1891 were reduced, because the uprising followed out of "anger" upon the confiscation of the association flag and was not planned.

⁷⁶This person may be Mrs István Csöntör.

⁷⁷János Verebélyi (b. 1872), interviewed in 1966 by Imre Nagy, teacher at Battonya, for the collection of the local history study group of Battonya, in László Takács (ed.), *Battonya 1891. Tanulmányok az agrárszocialista zendülés 75. évfordulójának emlékére* (Battonya, 1966), p. 82; Sándor Nagy, Jr, *A szocializmus keletkezése Hódmezővásárhelyen* (Hódmezővásárhely, 1924), p. 80.

to retreat from the police, “shouting at the top of her lungs: ‘Do not run away like cowards! Take these sticks and hit them to death, these dogs!’”⁷⁸

Additionally, reports about the uprisings and the documentation produced during subsequent court hearings recorded stories with women at their centre that obviously aimed to discredit the activists as socialists. Women’s overall representation as irrational and extreme by the authorities, contemporary observers, and the press, such as in the reportage discussed above, also had the effect of discrediting the entire agrarian socialist movement. The local paper in Hódmezővásárhely attempted to cast Lukács in a bad light by referring to a statement from her court hearing by a Mrs Kovács, who claimed that Lukács had tried to convince her to join the socialists by first offering her an alcoholic drink. When Kovács refused it, Lukács was said to have boasted about her status as a “number one socialist” and purportedly lashed out at Kovács with insults.⁷⁹ The use of the term “number one socialist” in Hungarian employs a derogatory formulation of the word “socialist” (*czuczilárlista*), which clearly indicates that the news report aimed to paint a negative portrait of the allegedly scandalous behaviour of Lukács and, thus, ridicule and discredit agrarian socialism.⁸⁰

A more complex understanding of the contribution of women in the first phase of agrarian socialist activism in Viharsarok comes to the fore when we look at a wider variety of available sources. The recollections of former socialist activists, whose memories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were recorded during the interwar period or the first decades of the state-socialist period (the 1950s and 1960s), reveal the presence of women in organized labour activism and serve as valuable alternatives to the texts left behind by the late nineteenth-century ruling elite. While these place- and event-specific collections of historical interviews and published and unpublished personal memoirs mostly involve men, they nevertheless enrich the image of women’s activism, offering details that go far beyond the articles in local newspapers and the reports of the police and leading officials in the national, county, and local administration, which the mainstream historiography has relied on up to now.

Although fellow men activists’ recollections at times also discuss women’s presence in the movement in terms of their fierceness, their stories tend to have more positive connotations and refer to women’s contributions. In one of the few published memoirs related to agrarian socialist activism in Viharsarok in the 1890s, Sándor Nagy, Jr explicitly mentions that “the women and the children” also attended the gathering where János Szántó Kovács was elected president of the Hódmezővásárhely association.⁸¹ The house was already packed with people when János Szántó Kovács arrived with his wife, Julianna Deák. The conversational tone of the narrative emphasizes Szántó Kovács’s exemplary respect towards his wife: “Good day! Please,

⁷⁸“A vasárnapi zendülés”, *Vásárhely és Vidéke*, special issue, 23 April 1894, p. 4.

⁷⁹“A zendülők végtárgyalása: 3. nap”, *Vásárhely és Vidéke*, special issue, 7 March 1895, p. 4.

⁸⁰*Czuczilárlista* was one of several folk etymological varieties of the derogatory term for “socialist” in Hungarian. A folk etymological dictionary from the early twentieth century listed eight regional varieties, including *cocilista*, which was the most widespread term in Hungary, *cocista* (registered in Tápió-Szt. Márton), *cokilista* (in Félégyháza), *copidlista* (in Kömlő, Heves county), *cucilista* (in central Hungary), and *csucsilista* (in Baranya County). Pál Nádaí, *A magyar népetimológia* (Budapest, 1906), p. 7.

⁸¹Nagy, Jr, *A szocializmus*, p. 80.

make a bit of room [...] Go ahead, my partner!' said Szántó Kovács to his wife [...] He had brought her today so that she could also hear him talk".⁸²

In a separate section on women's activism, Nagy, Jr evokes the gendered image of "the weaker sex" to highlight women's power as fellow activists. Women attended the gatherings:

Even though several men comrades laughed at them, that they were women, and their job was in the home with the children. But they [the women] thought and felt otherwise. They could differentiate between having enough and having nothing, and in their case, it was the latter. Despite being weak women, they could read the sadness behind their husbands' smile and their worries. They fought together and in front of them in the name of the holy thought.⁸³

Although women faced discrimination and hostility from both their male comrades and non-socialist women, the first separate women-only structures were established at practically the same time as the formation of the men-dominated agrarian workers' circles and associations. Nagy, Jr quoted a song entitled "Women Workers! [Join] under the Red Banner!", written by a choir member named Juliánna Bárdos in the early 1890s, which explicitly encouraged women to join the movement.

Personal recollections provide details about the presence of numerous women involved in pre-planned and organized forms of socialist activism who did not make it into the authorities' reports, which focused only on the male leadership. Nagy, Jr, mentions the twenty-two-member association choir, which included ten women: Juliánna Bárdos; Anna Elek; Zsófia Fejes; Zsófia Nagy; Mária Csorba; Jusstína Csorba; Mária Kapás; Lidia Balog; Zsuzsánna Csarmaz; and Juszti Franciszti, each of whom paid a ten-krajcár enrolment fee.⁸⁴ Other sources, like interviews with former comrades, further reveal that women participated in a variety of gender-differentiated activist tasks, such as the renovation and cleaning of the association building and the sewing of the association flag. Based on interviews conducted in 1950 with men activists, who were in their eighties at the time, historian Imre Katona identified home-making, an activity in which women took a central role, as an important motive behind the establishment of the workers' circle.⁸⁵ For example, Katona recalled that Mrs Bálint Hegedűs and "another woman comrade" had whitewashed the walls and the floor of the building and spread sand on the floor in preparation for the inauguration ceremony at Hódmezővásárhely.⁸⁶

Each association and workers' circle had its own flag, which was made by women and funded by the financial contributions of members. Historian Péter Hanák has pointed to the value of symbolic objects, actions, and rituals, including those around the association flag, in Hungary's agrarian socialist movement. Highlighting similar rituals in the Southern Italian and Spanish agrarian socialist movements, he

⁸²*Ibid.*

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸⁵Katona, "Az első véres május 1-e", p. 179.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 64.

emphasized their role in the creation of “a new, laicized religion” among peasants.⁸⁷ The importance of the flag is also indicated by the tradition of its ceremonial consecration, which was a festive event attended by association members and invited guests. Flags were usually made of white silk and embellished with red embroidered mottos guiding social democratic activism, such as those of the French Revolution – “Freedom! Equality! Fraternity!” – and the Second International: “eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for rest”.⁸⁸ Reports on and recollections of the bloody events of 1 May in Orosháza show that the flag was not only sewn by women, but it was also specifically identified with women’s labour activism. The workers’ association planned to hold the ceremonial dedication of its new flag that day when the gendarmerie confiscated it. One former participant even named the first phase of the ensuing uprising the “flag revolution”, referring to association members’ motivation for gathering in front of the magistrate’s office and demanding the return of their flag.⁸⁹ In his reports, the district magistrate recalled that at around 10 am, a women’s committee came to him, asking for the flag’s return “as it was they who had sewn it and given it to the association”.⁹⁰ The court sentence of the participants of the uprising on 12 September 1891 at Békésgyula (Gyula) specified that there was a “three-member women’s committee”.⁹¹ The local paper, *Orosházi Újság*, identified Mrs István Csöntör as the committee’s leader.⁹² These were also the women who smashed the windows of building with bricks upon learning that the flag would not be returned.⁹³

Although cleaning, sewing, and whitewashing were tasks typically done by women in village communities, an inclusive and subaltern studies approach allows for an interpretation of peasant women’s labour activism that departs from construing them as merely the reification of traditional gender roles in the agrarian socialist movement. Contemporary authorities and the news media described women’s participation in activism as inappropriate behaviour. Fellow villagers and even their male comrades approached peasant women’s socialist activism with antagonism. Centring the analysis on peasant women and how their appearance in the public sphere – a male space – was perceived by contemporaries, I interpret their mere presence in the spaces associated with the organized socialist movement and their activities – performing in the association choir, cleaning the association building, sewing the association flag – as transgressive behaviour. Building on an inclusive approach in feminist labour

⁸⁷Péter Hanák, “Az agrárszocialista mozgalom mentalitása és szimbólumai”, in *A kert és a műhely* (Budapest, 1988), pp. 204–221, 215.

⁸⁸Katona, “Az első véres május 1-e”, p. 182.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁹⁰János Kiss, Report by the lord lieutenant of Békés County to the lieutenant of Hungary about the uprising of agrarian workers at Orosháza, 2 December 1867, Helytartósági elnöki iratok 1863–XIII-15.525, Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (hereafter HU-MNL-OL), Budapest, Hungary; Pál Jancsovics, Minutes about the events of 1 May 1891 taken by the lieutenant of Békés County at Orosháza, 2 May 1891, IV. 407/a. Békés Vármegye alispánja iratai 224/1891. eln (MMI) Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Békés Megyei Levéltára, Gyula, Hungary.

⁹¹MMTVD, vol. 2, p. 91.

⁹²“Az orosházi munkás-lázadók elitélése”, *Orosházi Újság*, 20 September 1891, p. 2.

⁹³Katona, “Az első véres május 1-e”, p. 183; “Munkás mozgalom”, *Orosházi Újság*, 3 May 1891, p. 2.

history that recognizes that along with the gendered division of (paid) labour, men and women were assigned different responsibilities in associational and activist life, I argue that all these activities were a demonstration of women's political consciousness.

“We Have Formed a Women’s Organization”: The Second Group of Activist Women in Viharsarok, 1897–1900

By the spring of 1897, numerous groups of women in Viharsarok had begun to form their own separate structures within socialist organizations. The initiative for this organizing came with the new turn in socialist politics brought about by the establishment of the independent social democratic movement and the Independent Socialist Party. Historian József Farkas has underlined the egalitarian character of the Várkonyi movement, albeit with a focus on men's activism.⁹⁴ For example, the independent socialist paper *Földművelő* relied on regularly published texts written by day labourers and servants themselves.⁹⁵ The more egalitarian and grassroots character that differentiated this movement from the MSZDP-oriented agrarian labour activism positively affected women's organizing, too. Mariska Várkonyi and her mother, Mrs Mária Vida Várkonyi (1852–1923), often accompanied István Várkonyi when he toured the country. While István worked with the (male) leaders and members of the local associations, the two women met with the wives and daughters of the male activists as well as other local women.⁹⁶ Furthermore, Mariska Várkonyi's diary from early 1898 testifies to the work she performed for *Földművelő*, including, among other tasks, editing the incoming letters and texts and preparing them for publication.⁹⁷ Thanks to her work, the introductory words written in connection with announcements about the founding of new women's groups that were published in the paper were positive and supportive of such initiatives. For example, the 9 April 1897 issue of *Földművelő* praised “the tireless efforts and fervour that women supporting [agrarian socialist] principles manifest in forming organizations”.⁹⁸ These statements surely meant a lot to the paper's

⁹⁴József Farkas, *“Ne legyen többé se úr, se szolgál!” Az agrárszocialisták eszmevilága* (Budapest, 1989).

⁹⁵The average literacy rates (knowledge of both reading and writing) in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg Monarchy stood at 42 per cent according to statistical data from 1890, and 49 per cent according to data from 1900. In the counties of Viharsarok, rates were somewhat higher. In Békés, 60 per cent and 65 per cent; in Csanád, 45 per cent and 54 per cent; and in Csongrád, 42 per cent and 52 per cent, respectively. Magyar Kir. Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (ed.), *Magyar Statisztikai Évkönyv*, Új Folyam 13, 1905 (Budapest, 1906), p. 324.

⁹⁶József Farkas named Mariska Várkonyi as organizer of the women's movement, mentioning the correspondence between Várkonyi and women comrades from the countryside. Farkas, *“Ne legyen többé”*, p. 88, and Farkas, “Várkonyi Mariska”, p. 301. Yet, these statements cannot be confirmed by primary sources from the period, even though a review about an exhibition at the Kossuth Museum of Cegléd in Hungary (hereafter CKM) on István Várkonyi and the agrarian socialist movement at Cegléd held between 12 February and 20 March 1967 also referred to such documents. These materials have unfortunately not been located among the materials preserved by the CKM today.

⁹⁷The surviving excerpts from Mariska Várkonyi's diary from 1898 written on the pages of a calendar, CKM 80. 2. 2.

⁹⁸“Eltársnőink buzgósága”, *Földművelő*, 9 April 1897, p. 3.

female readership. In the following pages, I discuss peasant women's activist agendas, which included the challenges of organizing, the difficulties of being a wage worker and a mother, and the poor remuneration of both peasant men's and women's labour.

Peasant women formulated a variety of women-specific activist agendas. Prominent among these was their call for "women comrades" to join the ranks of the agrarian socialist movement. In their invitations, women regularly addressed the need for mixed-gender socialist activism as well as women's separate organizing. Numerous women claimed that, like their husbands and other men, they, too, wanted to stand "under the banner of social democracy". They used different arguments to justify their activism and participation in the organizations to their men comrades. After emphasizing their pride at having "created a space for [themselves] among the circle of those who strive towards the transformation of today's decaying society and thus the improvement of their situation", the women of Nagy-Szénás (Nagyszénás) defensively declared the following in the 9 April 1897 issue of *Földművelő*: "You have taken on more than you can handle! This is what many of you might think, shaking your heads doubtfully and derisively". Then, addressing men directly, they continued: "It is you, men, whom we would like to help, and if it becomes necessary: to act independently. Do not belittle the step we have taken. Time will tell that it has not been in vain".⁹⁹

One of the arguments the women activists often used was that socialist labour activism was a women's issue. They used *Földművelő* to motivate each other and encourage other women "not to remain behind men", "to wake up", and "grow from their child-like state" and become active because women had a stake in fighting against exploitation. The women of Ó-Becse (Óbecse) formulated the following upon the establishment of their group on 28 March 1897: "We vowed to each other that we will not stay passive either but will act against the present exploitation through our organization [...] We are going to show that we women are also capable of doing something against the limitless [exploitation]."¹⁰⁰ Women referred to their special position in the movement due to their roles as mothers. Members of the organization in Kis-Csákó (Kiscsákó) evoked mothers' responsibilities as their children's teachers, "recommending that women not estrange themselves from taking part in fighting for the truth" and "[join] their husbands in working for the achievement of human rights: It is especially we women who are destined to teach our offspring and explain the truths held within socialism to them".¹⁰¹ As Temma Kaplan has argued, "female consciousness" has political implications.¹⁰² Peasant women took their obligations as mothers as the starting point for their political engagement and saw motherhood as justification for their participation in the agrarian socialist movement.

Women also emphasized the need for men and women to fight jointly against oppression. They claimed that it would be disadvantageous for the agrarian socialist

⁹⁹Contribution by the women of Nagy-Szénás, *Földművelő*, 9 April 1897, p. 3. The "contributions" by women I reference here and in subsequent notes do not have formal titles. For this reason, I refer to them as the "contribution" of the person to whom they are attributed by the paper.

¹⁰⁰Contribution by the women of Ó-Becse, *Földművelő*, 2 April 1897, p. 3.

¹⁰¹Contribution by the women of Kis-Csákó, *Földművelő*, 21 May 1897, p. 4.

¹⁰²Kaplan, "Female Consciousness", p. 546.

movement if women were not included. The women of Nagy-Szénás (Nagyszénás), for example, compared agrarian workers to an army that cannot win a battle if “one half of it is well-armed and has a well-considered plan before it goes into war, while its other half, and this would be us women, runs ahead without a plan, without any arms or unity, or conversely, just stands in sorrowful passivity waiting for the betterment of the situation without thinking about the future of their children”.¹⁰³ In another case, women complained openly about men’s lack of interest in socialism in their region, claiming that “it was women’s duty” to start organizing themselves and calling out to both men and women to join the movement.¹⁰⁴

Peasant Women’s Activist Agendas as Wage Workers and Mothers

Peasant women labour activists repeatedly discussed the difficulties associated with carrying out household and childcare work while also engaging in paid work outside the home. This was the very point women made in the 12 March 1897 issue of *Földművelő* about the founding of the “first women’s organization” in Mező-Berény (Mezőberény): “We, the working women of Mező-Berény, found it necessary to form a women’s organization [...] We found it imperative and urgent that we form our organization because we women, we feel exploitation much more than men because it is only [or: in the end] we women who are hurt more deeply by the fact that we cannot raise our children properly”.¹⁰⁵ Women, therefore, explicitly connected their exploitation in the field of wage work to their position as mothers responsible for both feeding and raising their children. Numerous groups referred to the special position, experiences, and problems of working mothers responsible for carrying out their tasks in the home after a long and hard day of work, when all they desired was some rest. In several of her contributions to the 1899 issues of the paper published in Hódmezővásárhely, Ágnes Papp from Bács-Szent-Tamás in Vojvodina (Srbobran, Serbia) expressed these concerns in detail:

I am also just as poor as you all are, a mother of six, and I am troubled like all of you poor mothers, poor women workers: What is going to become of us? What is going to become of our children? Nobody asks us about the difficulties through which we must raise our children [...] And how is family life for us women workers? The husband works from dawn to late in the evening. When he returns home, his soul and body tired, he has hardly any desire to deal with his family but wants to rest. The working man, in effect, does not see his children because when he leaves, they are still asleep, and when he returns, they are already sleeping. He is basically just a guest at home.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Contribution by the women of Nagy-Szénás, *Földművelő*, 9 April 1897, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴Contribution by the women of Bács-Feketehegy, *Földművelő*, 21 May 1897, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵Contribution by the women of Mező-Berény, *Földművelő*, 12 March 1897, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶Contribution by Ágnes Papp, *Földművelő*, 24 March 1899, pp. 3–4.

Here, Papp both addresses the gendered problem of what came to be defined in feminist scholarship as women's "double burden" as well as identifies how the conditions of day labour also adversely affected men in their roles as fathers.

The lack of childcare was a central issue in peasant women's labour activism.¹⁰⁷ The women of Pusztta-Földvár (Puszttaföldvár), for example, stated:

It is necessary for women to work because they otherwise cannot raise their children. But how to feed our babies then? What should the mothers of poor families do? They [the bourgeois] surely say that women should stop breastfeeding their children and should go to work. But who looks after our babies while we are at work? We cannot work properly because we are afraid what might happen to our babies at home. When an accident happens, we are the ones who are held responsible even though it is not our fault.¹⁰⁸

The weight of this issue for peasant women is evidenced by the fact that in the only known recorded contribution of a woman delegate, Ágnes Mata, at one of the Independent Socialist Party congresses in Cegléd between 8 and 10 September 1897, Mata used the very same words to describe the risks and worries working women had about leaving their children at home unattended. Mata was one of a total of four women delegates present at the congress and was dressed completely in red in honour of the occasion.¹⁰⁹

Another major theme appearing on the agenda of peasant women's labour activism was the poor remuneration of men and women day labourers and servants. Women formulated three different positions regarding their demands: some argued for higher wages for men, while others specified the need for women's better remuneration. In a third group of contributions, it was unclear for whom the women sought increased wages. These positions were not mutually exclusive, and even the same person might voice more than one of them. Those women who demanded higher wages for men were hoping that a single family wage would allow mothers to devote their attention solely to child-rearing. The women of Bács-Szent-Tamás (Srbobran, Serbia) pointed out that it was economic need that drove them into wage work because it was impossible for a family to earn a living on a single wage.¹¹⁰ Together with the women of Füzes-Gyarmat (Füzesgyarmat), they argued that "once wages improve and our husbands earn enough to support the family, then we would also return to our original sphere of responsibilities".¹¹¹ Both women's desire to earn higher wages and their call for their husbands to earn more stemmed from the gendered nature of their work and their desire to be able to fulfil their obligations as mothers.

The women of Orosháza explicitly called for the better remuneration of women. Agrarian workers in Orosháza had, from the early 1890s on, emphasized economic

¹⁰⁷Contribution by Mrs Zsuzsanna Kabodi Mihály Ujj, Orosháza, *Földművelő*, 2 July 1897, p. 4; contribution by the women of Pusztta-Földvár, *Földművelő*, 14 May 1897, p. 3; and contribution by the women of Bács-Szent-Tamás, *Földművelő*, 28 May 1897, pp. 3–4.

¹⁰⁸Contribution by the women of Pusztta-Földvár, *Földművelő*, 14 May 1897, p. 3.

¹⁰⁹Contribution by Ágnes Mata to the Independent Socialist Party Congress, *Földművelő*, 17 September 1897, p. 3.

¹¹⁰Contribution by the women of Bács-Szent-Tamás, *Földművelő*, 28 May 1897, pp. 3–4.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*; contribution by the women of Füzes-Gyarmat, *Földművelő*, 26 November 1897, p. 3.

issues in their labour activism.¹¹² Women's contributions to *Földművelő* in the late 1890s suggest that they embraced as part of their labour activism the Independent Socialist Party's position that, depending on the type of work and local conditions of payment, all workers agree to the party's specific demands regarding remuneration in order to exert pressure on employers. The 26 March 1897 issue of *Földművelő* published Mrs István Brebovszki's call to all wash- and ironing women to organize against their exploitation through low wages.¹¹³ She urged women to demand set prices and provided a detailed table that contained daily wages as well as prices broken down by the number of items to be washed or ironed.

In August 1897, the women's group of Orosháza published another detailed list of wages women agrarian workers should demand. This call to women workers appeared in both *Földművelő* and one of the local papers of Orosháza with the recommendation that they be used by other women's associations too.¹¹⁴ The chart contained different wage categories structured according to the types of agricultural work performed in the spring, summer, and autumn; categories were further differentiated based on whether women workers received *konvenció* or not. It also covered women servants and different types of work women did for pay, often from their own homes: laundry and ironing; whitewashing; baking; and sewing. In comparison to Mrs Brebovszki's table on washing and ironing, this list offered more detailed price categories. It differentiated remuneration according to the time spent on various types of work and the amount of work done. The call closed with demands for the abolition of Sunday work as well as any sort of labour performed without remuneration. These last two points had been on the general list of demands of agrarian wage workers and servants since the early 1890s. Furthermore, two other Orosháza women identified the difference between men's and women's wages as central to the cause of women's labour activism. As Etelka Forján put it, "the powerful tyrants exploit us [women] even more than men because our wages are even lower".¹¹⁵ Relatedly, Mrs Zsuzsanna Kabodi Mihály Ujj underlined how women's low wages were a particular problem for those mothers who were single earners in the family: Their financial situation was even worse because they were "fighting alone" due to the illness or death of their husbands.¹¹⁶

Finally, in several of the contributions that addressed the exploitation of women-workers and demanded better remuneration for "all agrarian workers," it was not clear whether the women were calling for wage increases and shorter workdays for men, for women, or for both. Mrs Éva Bolla Sándor Horváth from Puszta-Földvár (Pusztaföldvár), for example, formulated a claim in the name of all workers in which she stated that they needed time for relaxation after a hard day's work.¹¹⁷ She connected these issues to the concern for workers' health: slave-like and

¹¹²Farkas, "Ne legyen többé", p. 27.

¹¹³Contribution by Mrs István Brebovszki, Orosháza, *Földművelő*, 26 March 1897, p. 3.

¹¹⁴Contribution by the women of Orosháza, *Földművelő*, 6 August 1897, p. 4. Based on this publication, see also "Orosházi nőszervezet...", *Orosházi Újság*, 8 August 1897, p. 2, cited in Koszorús, "Forrásszemelvények", p. 169.

¹¹⁵Contribution by Etelka Forján, Orosháza, *Földművelő*, 18 June 1897, p. 3.

¹¹⁶Contribution by Mrs Zsuzsanna Kabodi Mihály Ujj, Orosháza, *Földművelő*, 2 July 1897, p. 4.

¹¹⁷Contribution by Mrs Éva Bolla Sándor Horváth, Puszta-Földvár, *Földművelő*, 28 May 1897, p. 3.

burdensome work leads to early death. A woman working on a farm in the vicinity of Orosháza, Mrs Katalin Szemenyei József Rajki, spoke out against the exploitation of farm women (*tanyasi nők*) in two different issues of *Földművelő* published in the summer of 1897.¹¹⁸ On the one hand, she urged women to insist on having a written contract instead of only a verbal agreement on working conditions and remuneration because, otherwise, they would not be able to prove what their employer had promised them. She claimed that verbal agreements were the cause of women's exploitation and were used to make women do unpaid work such as laundry or raising chickens for their employers on their own husbands' meagre earnings. On the other hand, in her second contribution, Mrs Rajki demanded better wages and shorter workdays for all agricultural workers. Even though she explicitly underlined women's suffering due to poor remuneration and long workdays, she used the plural form when she exclaimed that "the workers" were not afraid of their employers' efforts to break their struggle for a "more humane" livelihood.¹¹⁹

Women activists felt strongly about the existence of a set of problems in the living and working conditions of poor peasants that affected women specifically. This motivated them to undertake labour activism in separate women's structures and to call for the founding of a newspaper to address the distinct needs of women workers. As the women of Ó-Becse (Óbecse) wrote, their group "unanimously expressed the need for such a paper". It would, they argued, "give us a chance to talk about our terrible situation, our problems and grievances, and to present our situation to the world".¹²⁰ The party managed to support a similar initiative proposed by the men-dominated networks of Serbian workers, which must have inspired the women. However, this time, *Földművelő*'s editorial team responded that, although they believed it to be "a good plan", they "could not guarantee their contribution" to the women due to their over-extended editorial staff. Importantly, while women founded their own separate structures, they did not stop working and organizing with men in mixed-gender fora. This is evidenced by numerous announcements and short reports in *Földművelő* about planned or past local festivals (merriments) organized by men and women together.

Conclusion

Building on an inclusive and subaltern studies approach, this article reveals the participation of peasant women in the mixed-gender agrarian socialist movement in 1890s Hungary. Identifying women agrarian day labourers and servants as labour activists with agendas that addressed both women specifically and all impoverished agrarian labourers, it has drawn attention to the Eastern European countryside as an as-yet unexplored terrain in the historiography of women's and labour

¹¹⁸Contributions by Mrs Katalin Szemenyei József Rajki, *Földművelő*, 2 July 1897, p. 4 and 13 August 1897, p. 4. The closest English translation of the term *tanyasi nők* would be "women of the farms". It refers to peasant women working at and living on farms as servants.

¹¹⁹Contribution by Mrs Katalin Szemenyei József Rajki, *Földművelő*, 13 August 1897, p. 4.

¹²⁰Contribution by the women of Ó-Becse, *Földművelő*, 13 August 1897, p. 4.

movements. The article has highlighted agrarian workers' mixed-gender organizations as one of the sites where the earliest women's activist agendas in Hungary were first articulated.

Concerning the first phase of women's agrarian socialist labour activism between 1890 and 1894, I demonstrate that the marginal appearance of peasant women's labour activism in the surviving documents produced by authorities does not mean women did not engage in political activism. Furthermore, I argue that the national and local news media at the time sensationalized peasant women's labour activism and represented it as inappropriate due to the gendered norms of acceptable behaviour. These images and reportage contributed to the representation of peasant women activists as overly emotional and irrationally aggressive, depictions that were used to delegitimize the agrarian socialist movement. The existing historiography has, unfortunately, adopted the marginal representation of peasant women's labour activism from the contemporary press – which highlighted women's presence only in spontaneous protests – as well as its emphasis on the irrationally emotional character of women's activism. However, drawing on fellow activists' recollections, this article shows that, contrary to previous scholarship, women activists participated in the organized and planned forms of labour activism of the late nineteenth-century agrarian socialist movement in Hungary. Moreover, an inclusive approach to peasant women's repertoires of action in mixed-gender associations, which followed the patterns of the contemporary gendered division of labour, enables us to recognize the transgressive nature of these acts.

To explore the second phase of women's agrarian socialist activism in Viharsarok, the article taps into underexplored sources relevant to the historiography on women's social movements. Peasant women's contributions to the agrarian socialist paper *Földművelő* between 1897 and 1900 reveal the reasons behind their gender-specific demands and their motivations for forming separate women's structures within the agrarian socialist movement. Their women-centred activist agendas included the need to overcome the difficulties of attending to household chores and child-rearing while performing wage work outside the home, and they demanded an end to their exploitation through wage labour. Women called for better wages, shorter workdays, and more respectful treatment by their employers. Indeed, they played a pioneering role in late nineteenth-century Hungary, highlighting the poor remuneration and inhumane treatment of men and women agrarian labourers and calling attention to issues particular to agrarian women workers, who performed wage labour and unpaid household and care work. This role has gone unacknowledged in the historiography of women's social movements.

This article also contributes to the existing scholarship in feminist labour history that argues for the politicization of lower- and working-class women in terms of their sense of rights, responsibilities, and obligations as they related to the gendered division of labour. Women reasoned for their participation in the agrarian socialist movement and formulated their agendas based on their responsibilities as providers of childcare and other social reproductive work in peasant communities. Peasant women were aware of the gendered nature of their work and elucidated the importance of recognizing women's agendas for strengthening the agrarian socialist movement as a whole.

Through their labour activism, peasant women responded to the specific problems agrarian (women) workers faced at the onset of industrialization in an Eastern European agrarian society characterized by increasing inequalities between large-estate owners and vast numbers of the landless poor. As subaltern scholarship has argued for peasants on the global periphery: they were political actors. They contributed to class formation and thereby to the shaping of the state. Peasant women, together with their male comrades, fought for goals such as shorter workdays, work-free Sundays, the abolition of unpaid labour, and higher wages, issues that were similar to those on the agendas of the emerging working classes in Eastern European societies at the time. Including peasant women's labour activism in the history of women's social movements thus enlarges our understanding of the groups of actors who shaped women- and gender-specific political agendas. Indeed, peasant women articulated several concerns that later became the central issues of a variety of twentieth-century women's activisms globally, including the need for wage equality and women's increased inclusion in public life based on their special gendered contributions, as well as the tension between women's paid and unpaid work.