

**NEM! - A NOVEL SPACE OF FEMALE SOLIDARITY WITHIN THE  
LEFTIST ACTIVIST NETWORK OF BUDAPEST**

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## **Abstract**

The present thesis analyses a case of a system-critical feminist initiative, called NEM! (NO!), which emerged to challenge the gendered power dynamics within the Budapest based leftist network. Based on semi-structured interviews with members of NEM!, participatory observation and the examination of NEM!'s online presence, this research investigates how this feminist initiative pursues through its various activities to address the marginality of female perspectives within an activist network. The study also examines the significance and meaning of NEM! within this leftist network. Based on the results, NEM! emerges to be a female solidarity space which supports and accommodates a diverse set of activities, which concern and derive from an extended understanding of capitalism with a focus on women's structural oppression. As the research demonstrates, in NEM!'s first two years of existence, its significance lies in its engagement in women's possibilities to actively participate in leftist activism, and in integrating women's structural oppression into the leftist knowledge production.

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 7493  
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(Lilla Eredics)

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## Introduction

Over the last decade, various leftist initiatives have emerged in Budapest, independently of any political parties, forming a motley network comprising also leftist academics and activists in the capital. As such, in the autumn of 2018, a group of women (most of whom were university students) established an organization called NEM! [NO!] The significance of this initiative is that it emerged with around twenty women who recognized and negatively experienced the inner gendered dynamics of the leftist network and wanted to do something about it, which eventually led to founding NEM! Their mission was to build a solidarity network for women and raise awareness of the different forms of women's oppression. In its current stage, NEM! strives to reach this goal by organizing a reading group for women that examines system critical leftist feminist literature; collecting female hygiene products for women in poverty; publishing zines that target the deconstruction of pop culture for teen readers; cooperating with other anti-capitalist initiatives through events and projects and building solidarity with other organizations of women. In the leftist network in which NEM! is embedded formal activist initiatives and informal links between activists are interconnected in several ways and rely on a common ideological basis of critical theory and anti-capitalism<sup>1</sup>.

By focusing on the current activities of NEM! and its aims within the leftist network, this research approaches NEM! as a feminist initiative that emerged in opposition to the gendered dynamics within an anti-capitalist activist space in Budapest, Hungary. My research is driven by such questions as: What is the significance of NEM! within the larger leftist network? Through what activities does NEM! pursue to reformulate the gendered power relations within the field? What is their current role within the anti-capitalist network? How does NEM! fit into the anti-capitalist network? What are the struggles of NEM! within the activist field?

In my understanding of the field, I build upon Ágnes Gagyi's book (2018) on the Eastern European movements and the Hungarian leftist intellectual field. In addition, my empirical examination is largely informed by feminist critiques of capitalism. In order to map the gendered dynamics of system-critical activist spaces and its knowledge production, as an

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<sup>1</sup>Based on Porta and Diani's findings on "dense informal networks" in social movement processes, by 'formal activist initiatives' here I refer to the various forms of initiatives and projects in which groups of activists organize themselves to work together on a social issue, which often leads to the establishment of activist organizations. 'Informal links' refers to the tight personal relations and interactions among these activists by which they get together beyond the professional activities and projects (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, pp. 25, 117).

important cause of the emergence of NEM!, I rely on feminist scholars' writing on "gendered power relations" in activist spaces and on feminist critiques on how anti-capitalist views tend to ignore women's structural oppression (Coleman & Bassi, 2011; Craddock, 2019; Mellor, 2019; Fraser, 2014; Fraser, 2016). In addition, as women in this leftist network reacted to these gendered obstacles with the formation of NEM!, which is a 'female space', I find Fraser's argument for "subaltern counterpublic" quite relevant. Moreover, Fraser, Arruzza and Bhattacharya's manifesto for anti-capitalist feminism (2019), which was used by NEM! in one of their reading events<sup>2</sup> also contributes to my understanding of feminist initiatives' role in the leftist network.

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, my empirical research focuses on the narratives of women on the part of NEM!'s members and is complemented with my participatory observation and the examination of NEM!'s online presence. For my research I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of NEM! and participated in one of their reading events. In addition, I examined their social media activities regarding their event descriptions, publications and media appearances. My motivation to examine NEM! comes from my own involvement within this anti-capitalist network, and I am aware that my subjective views have colored what I have observed. In the initial phase, my personal involvement has emerged as an obstacle in terms of thinking beyond my subjective views of NEM! and the leftist network. I attempted to interpret NEM! as part of my critique on intellectual activism and my motivation was to demonstrate the contradictions and difficulties of doing activism against oppression from a privileged, intellectual position. Eventually, my empirical and theoretical research led me to reformulate and extend my, by which I could see what else NEM! could mean in the context of the anti-capitalist activism. I realized that NEM! reacted to the gendered oppression in its own environment and its activities and its significance can be first of all understood and explained in this light, as this dissertation is about to demonstrate.

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<sup>2</sup>Notes they published from the reading event on which NEM! dealt with the anti-capitalist manifesto:

<https://www.facebook.com/nokegytasertmozgalom/photos/a.356292548252555/517358012146007/?type=3&theater>

## I. Historical contextualization of the leftist activist network and feminist critiques on anti-capitalist initiatives

### I. 1. Historical contextualization: The leftist network in Hungary

Ágnes Gagyí's research examines the political mobilizations after the 2008 crisis in the Central-Eastern-European region from a global historical perspective (2018). What is relevant here regarding the position of NEM! as an initiative embedded in the leftist intellectual network, is the part of her research that focuses specifically on the leftist initiatives between the period of 2010 and 2017 in the CEE, including Hungary (Gagyí, 2018, pp. 224-266). Her analysis elucidates the unfolding and the current shape of the leftist medium which is also reflected in the operation and activities of the NEM!

As noted by Gagyí, the leftist medium in its current form materializes in the interconnecting and “alliance-seeking” aspirations of various intellectual groups and activist initiatives through offline and online spaces, producing a common system-critical intellectual and cultural knowledge (Gagyí, 2018, p. 254). According to Gagyí, on the one hand, the intensification of leftist approaches in the CEE region stems from the global middle-class mobilizations and demonstration waves, which formed following the crisis of 2008. In Hungary as well, the resistance of the “educated middle-class” against Orbán’s illiberal politics in the 2010s led to a number of leftist and system-critical initiatives and projects (Gagyí, 2018, p. 264). Besides, Gagyí remarks that a few intellectual leftist groups have been “continuously active since the regime transition in Hungary” in the anti-capitalist and system critical knowledge production (Gagyí, 2018, p. 219).

As the still operating leftist forums that have survived since the regime transition Gagyí especially refers to ‘*Eszmélet*’, a journal in critical social and cultural studies<sup>3</sup> and to the College for Advanced Studies in Social Theory (TEK)<sup>4</sup>, which is more important in terms of the embeddedness of NEM!, as a few founding members had been members of this College. TEK was founded in 1981 as a self-organized, autonomous institution by young researchers and students, aiming to contribute to the knowledge of those engaged in social issues by the critique of mainstream discourses on structural oppression and inequalities stemming from the capitalist

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eszmelet.hu/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://tekesek.hu/>



order. Its knowledge production is based on critical social theory, relying on political economy, postcolonial studies, world system theory, gender studies, green studies and urban research.

As Gagyi demonstrates it, the new left initiatives and the existing leftist intellectual groups have not created a unified and structured base for a system critical social movement, but various overlaps and connections developed between 2010 and 2017. Gagyi talks about the formation of a “new expertise”, which though does not form a unified discourse in the “left field”, acts towards the “theoretical and practical innovation of the new left politics”. As a result, in the last decade many projects and initiatives have arisen from the aspiration to connect intellectual and scholarly work with political action and with movement organizing (Gagyi, 2018, p. 249). Several activist organizations and “leftist forums” were formed partly by ex TEK-members besides NEM! between 2010 and 2017. Including, for instance, *Helyzet Műhely* (a scholarly working group for analyzing contemporary Hungarian society from a critical leftist perspective)<sup>5</sup>, *AVM* (The City Is For All - where the activists and the affected people deal with housing issues together)<sup>6</sup>, *SZGK* (Solidarity Economy Union – *Szolidáris Gazdaság Központ*, an organization to support the union of solidarity economy initiatives in the country)<sup>7</sup> and *Gólya* (community house/pub/café operating on a cooperative basis in the 8th district)<sup>8</sup>. Currently, *Gólya* serves as a basis for this activist network. It provides separate office space for a few organizations and hosts both public and closed events as conferences, trainings, fundraisings and meetings of all sorts, including political events.

As maintained by Porta and Diani, in the case of activist networks, individuals and organizations are informally and formally interconnected and certain issues are unitedly considered as socially relevant and worthy of collective actions. Along with these personal contacts people go to certain places and organize events where activist acquaintances show up and spaces become constituted for informal social networks’ subcultural dynamics (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, pp. 117-121). Collective identity in the case of social movement and activist spaces awakens the struggle for a common purpose and shared commitment to an issue, which enables activists and organizations to regard themselves as linked to other actors. The feeling of “collective we” intertwines private and collective interests, increasing the enthusiasm of

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<sup>5</sup> <https://helyzet.wordpress.com/english/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://avarosmindenkie.blog.hu/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://szolidarisgazdasagkozpont.hu/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://golyapresszo.hu/>

individuals to create spaces where collective identity can be stimulated (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, pp. 94-96). The feeling of collectiveness in the case of this leftist network stems from the common knowledge of critical theories, and system-critical and common subcultural practices. In knowledge production, Marxist theories and critical thinkers provide the basis – without the need for completeness, for instance Polányi, Wallerstein, Foucault, and Fraser.

Several events organized by different organizations in the last few months in Gólya have covered issues of leftist class politics, ecofeminism and climate crisis, leftist solidarity and social reproductive theory. A clear sign for the connection between organizations, initiatives, activists and academics is that there is a regularly held event at the end of every year where the annual work of several leftist initiatives is celebrated by the participants. Various academic and activist collaborations are regular among these organizations, academics and activists. They appear at a series of demonstrations, write academic texts and articles on important social issues in a critical perspective, work and think together during social crises. For instance, SZGK (Solidarity Economy Union) in collaboration with other 11 leftist organizations united under the name of ‘*Szolidaritási Akciócsoport*’ (Solidarity Action Group) and has launched a series of articles reflecting on coronavirus’ economic effects from the perspective of different social spheres<sup>9</sup>. SZGK has invited various academics and activists of this leftist network, including NEM!’s members to write on the social reproductive sphere<sup>10</sup> and on the domestic violence<sup>11</sup> against women. This social network works with a collective identity whereby supporting, producing and acting according to anti-capitalist and critical thinking is perceived worthy and meaningful.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://merce.hu/author/szolidaritasi-akciocsoport/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://merce.hu/2020/04/11/ti-mit-csinaltok-hogy-megmaradjon-a-munkatok-es-a-gyerek-se-erezze-ezt-meg/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://merce.hu/2020/04/11/nok-elleni-eroszak-a-jarvany-idejen-miert-fokozodik-es-hogyan-lehet-tenni-ellene/>

## **I. 2. Feminist critiques on the male dominance in activism, the consideration of subaltern counterpublics, and anti-capitalist feminism**

To date, several feminist scholars have investigated the gendered dynamics in system-critical activist initiatives. Craddock's analysis on "gendered power structures" within activist spaces highlights that women are often unable to notably take part in the anti-capitalist or system-critical activism, which is often dominated by men, without women's significant participation. Similarly, Coleman and Bassi's study on masculine patterns within anti-globalization movements shows that masculine behavior is often privileged within system-critical activist spaces. Besides, both researches notes the prevalence of sexism and abuse in these activist spaces (Craddock, 2019, p. 1; Coleman & Bassi, 2011). Despite the fact that the aim of such system-critical spaces is to resist the system of which the oppression of women is an immanent part, the normative order's "gendered power relations" often structures these activist spaces (Coleman & Bassi, 2011, p. 3). As Craddock points out, "such spaces often uphold the dominant structural oppression that they supposedly aim to bring down" (Craddock, 2019, p. 4). She suggests that the ignorance of gender differences often comes from the prioritization of class struggles over gender in the resistance of "elite power" (Craddock, 2019, p. 5). In line with these authors' findings, the leftist network into which NEM! is embedded, from time to time produces male-dominated dynamics, in spite recognizing the oppression of women on a discursive and symbolic level.

In terms of how NEM! reacted to the gendered dynamics that the women experienced within the activist sphere, Fraser's work on "subaltern counterpublics" provides some useful insights (Fraser, 1990, p. 13). Fraser critically examines Habermas' concept of the "public sphere" and states that these spheres may seem to be the "democratic arena" for political action detached from the hierarchical social order yet the narratives and interactions are formed according to the normalized existing order (Fraser, 1990, p. 11). Therefore, these public spheres are structured according to racial, class and gender hierarchies sustaining the privileged position of the bourgeois white men (Fraser, 1990). Fraser's suggests the need for "subaltern counterpublics", where the non-dominant groups can "circulate counter discourses" to develop their own voice on "their identity, interests and needs" independently from the normalized hegemonic order (Fraser, 1990, p. 13). As Fraser notes, such spaces of "withdrawal", "regroupment" and "training grounds for agitational activities" could contribute to the subordinated groups' ability to channel their own formulated discourses into the wider public arenas, reducing their subordination (Fraser, 1990, p. 12).

Although Coleman and Bassi specifically focus on women's gendered barriers in activism, the authors also contribute to another aspect by highlighting how "capitalism has relied upon concealed, underpaid or unpaid female labor", which many feminists aspire to insert into anti-capitalist politics (Coleman & Bassi, 2011, p. 3). The failure to consider women's burdens in capitalism has similarly been criticized by Mellor and Fraser. They both point out that anti-capitalist approaches tend to ignore women's burdened reproductive roles in the capitalist order (Fraser, 2014; Mellor, 2019). Fraser's argument draws attention to the essential "background conditions" of capitalist production - as nature and social reproduction- , and she suggests an extended understanding of capitalism which not only considers the economic sphere where commodity production takes place (Fraser, 2014, p. 6). As Fraser sees it, to the existence of waged work in the economic sphere, social reproductive activities as "birth-giving, socializing, caring and maintaining households" are essential. Yet the social importance of the reproductive sphere has been largely ignored, despite the fact that reproductive activities place heavy burdens on those who are subject to performing these tasks (Fraser, 2014; Fraser, 2016, p. 1). Thus, as Fraser notes, the critique of capitalism should not only include "the economic contradictions" of the capitalist order, but the contradictions of the ecological and social reproductive background conditions as well, which are equally exploited (Fraser, 2014, p. 18). Mellor, with a clearer emphasis on ecological consideration suggests the incorporation of "the entire life course" of each person with the idea of "sufficiency provisioning" to address both "ecological sustainability" and "social justice". She visions equal access to resources for life within the limits of what is sustainable for the biosphere through re-gendered, non-oppressive and cooperative relations (Mellor, 2019, pp. 1-4).

Fraser and his co-workers Arruzza and Bhattacharya in their anti-capitalist feminist manifesto '*Feminism for the 99%*' (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019) reflect on the crises arising from the contradictions affecting the economic and background spheres of the capitalist order. The manifesto points out that the various oppressions and inequalities are structurally interlinked and all stem from capitalism, and in order to change the order, the feminist movement should form political action in cooperation and in solidarity with other anti-capitalist initiatives. They stress that only an anti-capitalist feminist movement have the solidarity potential to resolve the contradiction between identity politics and class struggles. Besides, according to their manifesto, anti-capitalist feminism also reflects that the liberal feminism which became linked to neoliberal interests, has been reduced to an individual level and has erased the visibility of class and race. Instead of aiming at a feminism that only fits to privileged women's situation,

anti-capitalist feminism concerns many other forms of oppression and exploitation regarding gender, race and class divisions. Anti-capitalist feminism also considers the fact that capitalism has institutionalized the gendered oppression by placing the reproductive burdens of unpaid care work on women, and this structural gendered inequality legitimizes other forms of sexism and violence against women (Arruza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019). As my empirical research in the following will demonstrate, these aims above appear in NEM!'s diverse activities, and in its cooperative relations with other anti-capitalist initiatives.

Bíró's reflection on Feminism for the 99%, suggests that the manifesto concerns the main points of contemporary leftist theory in a complex way, and in light of this, it pursues to eliminate the obstacles of contemporary feminism. According to Bíró, the text combines the theoretical and political practice level of a capitalism critique of which they consider women's oppression as a fundamental aspect (Bíró, 2019). Bíró's insight is relevant in terms of NEM!, as its emergence was a reaction to the fact that the deconstruction of gendered power relations mainly appeared only on a theoretical and symbolic level within the leftist network. Besides, NEM! builds on a critique of capitalism that concerns women's structural burdens in a complex way, regarding the different forms of oppression in line with the manifesto's claim.

## II. Case Study – Analysis of NEM!

In the following section, I provide an examination of NEM!, in light of its aim to challenge the gendered relations within the Budapest based anti-capitalist field and its activities' contribution to highlight and reduce women's structural disadvantage. Below I describe their emergence, their form of operation and their activities.

### II. 1. NEM!'s emergence

The movement was established in August of 2018. The organization's antecedent came when a group of acquaintances at a local event got together, and a girl's ex-boyfriend who had abused her appeared. No one reacted on the girl's former abuser's appearance. The company ignored how she might be affected by his presence, people acted friendly with the boy. Later, a couple of girls sat down to talk about what could be done in such situations, what can they do to prevent the legitimization of abuse within a community in such ways. They began sharing their similar female experiences as women and think about what they could do within the activist network to stand against the abuse of women. To be more informed in their possibilities they contacted another women's organization called *NaNE* whose aim is to step up against violence against women. They gradually concluded that acting against abusive situations might be a legal issue for which they did not have the means and platform. However, what they had means for and activist possibilities was to look at the wider context and talk about the reasons why such situations could happen. As a result, they began to talk about oppression of women on a structural level. As one of the interviewees explained:

So, as in this preliminary part we talked about abuse, when it got more concrete to do something, we originally wanted to do something about this (abuse of women). Then we realized that NaNE is doing a great job on this field, so we sat down with them, and then had to realize that there is a little room for maneuver, and you could easily run into such defamation lawsuits. That's when we started talking about the structure. (Kata, NEM!, 2020)

## **II. 2. NEM!'s activities**

In its current stage, one of NEM!'s long-term visions is to raise awareness of the various forms of discrimination and oppression against women in Hungary, and to develop a broad social dialogue on these issues – whether it is everyday sexism, domestic violence, rape, reproductive work or any other form of discrimination against women (NEM!, 2018). Far from focusing only on one aspect on women's oppression, they target several forms of women's burdens from a structural perspective with their diverse activities. The basis of these activities is common, all concerned with NEM!'s critique of capitalism with respect to structural inequalities linked to women's situation. Moreover, NEM! is in cooperation with other initiatives within the leftist network and also aims to create a network among women's organizations in Hungary. For those who join NEM!, this initiative aims to provide a female space where women can share their experience of oppression and build a common system-critical feminist knowledge together, from which more activities – for instance feminist knowledge production or wider supportive female spaces - can grow out in the long run.

### **II.2.1.Teamwork-based operation**

The movement's operation is based on teamwork, in which everyone shares the same amount of responsibility. The team-work based operation, as well as their recruiting methods were taken over from TEK, as some of the members in NEM! have also been a member there. All members are expected to do the same amount of work to prevent the formation of hierarchy in which one may feel oppressed. All carry out their work along one specific action or activity. In February 2020, the members held an organization retreat, during which they examined their various activities to see how well they matched their vision. As a result, now the organization is currently in the process of being transformed, completing various activities, thus shifting the focus of some of the teams (Kata, NEM!, 2020).

In the following section I offer an overview of the teams. According to my observations, the clustering of teams is in accordance with their anti-capitalist goals of deconstructing pop culture and providing a counternarrative on liberal feminism, building solidarity among women on account of the common experience of structural oppression and raising awareness on women's burden in the lower classes. In addition, their idea of network-based movement building among

women is based on their own collective belonging and commitment to their leftist network and their knowledge of anti-capitalist feminism.

**a. Team for cooperation with other organizations**

This team is responsible for the steps towards building a network among women's organizations. Before the organizational transformation, their long-term goal was to create a network across the country.

Through contacting with women's organizations on the countryside and in the capital as well, we strive to create a female environment that is based on cooperation, exchange of experience and resources, in solidarity with each other. (NEM!, 2018)

In the last year, NEM! have been doing interviews with women's organizations within the capital, as a start for a micro network, and organized a few public discussions in cooperation with other organizations of women. For instance, on their event on Women's Day, they held a discussion on a potential community solution for childcare by inviting women from *Anyahajó Anyaközpont* which is a civil organization at József Attila panel block, aiming to build a community among the mothers living there and with *HellóAnyu*, which is a community space and eco-café for mothers with small children. Besides, they also held a discussion on emotional work and its burdens by inviting members from *NaNe* and *Patent*, organizations which deal with violence against women. After the organizational transformation, this networking was rethought because they encountered difficulties in how and what kind of relationship is worth building between organizations. As there is only a few women's organization sharing the same leftist feminism as NEM! does, they gradually noticed that beyond organizing events in cooperation, it is hard to overcome the obstacle of not sharing the same anti-capitalist and leftist idea of feminism. Moreover, they concluded that it may be even inappropriate to attempt to push through their idea of feminism on an organization which has its own 'local knowledge' of that environment and the women that it embraces. Drawing these conclusions, they have reached a phase in which they do not yet know what the next step should be in terms of networking. One member during the interview talked about this issue, stating that

We realized that a women's organization could be run on a municipalist basis. There is no need to operate a women's network between Budapest and a distant city, because it doesn't make sense. Organizations have local knowledge, it's good to have a minimal connection between them, but you can't do more than that. It may work to create a women's network in Pest County. But it's also hard, on what basis do you organize



people into it, if you just want left-wing women's organizations, it won't be a big net.  
(Dóra, NEM!, 2020)

Given that they are part of a quite specific leftist network in which the motivation for collective action is rooted in the anti-capitalist collective identity, it is difficult to build a network among women's organizations in the country regardless of their views on capitalism, as there would be no similar collective identity to hold the net together. Now they are thinking about the focus of politicization, which could be more the focus of their future actions. Through politicization, they want to draw women's attention to the fact that the problems they face are rooted in the system. In short, they want to spread the idea of anti-capitalist feminism, thereby reaching out to women to build a base. According to current plans, they would like to advertise this in the form of printed leaflets as a first step, focusing on issues that affect women, such as housework, in an everyday language (Ágnes, NEM!, 2020).

However, based on their offline and online presence and on the interviews it seems, that NEM!'s cooperation with the leftist network in which it is embedded is more significant and fluent. Members of NEM! are often invited to take part in several projects and appearances related to different aspects of women's structural oppression. As I mentioned before, this was recently the case with the Solidarity Action Group, in which several organizations work together collectively. In addition, two members in the representation of NEM! were invited for an interview in March 2020 to the Youtube channel of *Partizán* which is an informative program on current politics with a leftist focus<sup>12</sup>. Some members of NEM are also actively involved in the reproductive work project of SZGK (Solidarity Economy Union). These more formal links, and the everyday informal links between NEM!, and other leftist initiatives and its members demonstrates that NEM! has developed recognized role in the leftist field during the last two years.

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<sup>12</sup> Capitalist Patriarchy – Interview with two members of NEM!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y91ILrF4yEw>

### **b. Social media team**

This team has been set up to spread structural leftist feminism in the social media. Considering that liberal feminism has already taken root into mainstream pop culture, NEM! attempts to spread an anti-capitalist alternative. According to NEM!'s members, the aesthetic visual design of their online appearance is an effective tool for them for gaining recognition (Dóra, NEM!, 2020; Ágnes, NEM!, 2020). On their Facebook page<sup>13</sup>, they have already reached out to approximately 2,000 people, and they regularly share leftist activist events related to women's struggles. For instance, they shared an academic discussion on reproductive labor, a movie night in relation to women's movement and an article on domestic violence. NEM! itself also published an article in a leftist newspaper, *Mérce* as a 'coming out' titled as 'Building A Supportive Community For Women' in which they described their planned aims and activities in detail (NEM!, 2018). Furthermore, two more articles have been written about NEM! in other newspapers, one in relation to their birthday-event and one in connection with their activity of collecting female hygiene products for less privileged women (Halász, 2019; Domschitz, 2018).

### **c. Team for collecting female hygiene products for less privileged women**

With this activity, NEM! attempts to raise awareness on period poverty among women in financial deprivation, by which they could attract potential members. They decorated boxes, which they placed into women's restrooms of popular pubs and community places, where women could give away menstrual tools into the boxes. Based on the interviews I have conducted, more than six bags of menstrual tools had been collected, which were later delivered to girls in need (Kata, NEM!, 2020). During the organizational retreat they decided to stop this project for several reasons and those who worked in this team joined the network-building team. As the project was primarily aimed at raising awareness and recruiting members, they did not want to continue it in the long run in the first place. Furthermore, as one of the interviewee pointed out, it is difficult to reconcile this activity with their ideology in the long run:

It was great in the beginning because it's easy to join in, you reach a lot of women with it, we've involved a lot of women with this to think about poverty. But with fundraising,

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<sup>13</sup> NEM!'s Facebook Page:

[https://www.facebook.com/nokegytasertmozgalom/?epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/nokegytasertmozgalom/?epa=SEARCH_BOX)

what happens is that it's not a structural change, nothing changes with you collecting a donation, but it takes a lot of resources (Ágnes, NEM!, 2020).

#### **d. Teenzine team**

NEM! have published two different zines for teenagers so far, and they are planning to publish a third one. In this easy-to-read, amusing and accessible publications they focus on the deconstruction of mainstream gender roles and the pop culture which women internalize during socialization. Along with this focus, they attempt to spread a more capitalism critical counternarrative next to mainstream liberal feminism. Before choosing the topics of the zines they asked teenagers about their interests, and after they tested the finished zines with them. It has been delivered to teenagers for free through schools and through their events. The zines challenge teenager-targeted pop culture and gives alternatives which could raise young women's self-confidence and awareness on different forms of oppression (Kata, NEM!, 2020). The first one that they published *Crush vs. love vs. like* (*Crush vs. szerelem vs. szeretet*), contains content of crush, platonic love, toxic masculinity, consensuality in dating, dysfunctional and functional relationship, breakups, sexism. The second one, *Coolness, what is that?* (*A menőség az mi?*) deconstruct what makes a boy or a girl *cool* or *not cool*, tinimovies, peer pressure, drugs and alcohol, bullying and fast fashion. The third one, the last one will be about feminism, and will be published in June.

#### **e. NEM!'s reading group team**

NEM! regularly organizes two types of reading groups for women: one for the members and one publicly for any woman who would like to attend. Internal reading events are created to bring members' feminism-related background knowledge to a common level. Based on the interviews with the members of NEM!, public reading events are aimed as 'a first step towards change is that women became aware of their own oppression and begin to unite their experience' (Sára, NEM!, 2020). According to the members of NEM! "It is fantastic when during a reading event it turns out that everyone shares the same experience, it is so epic", and in this sense, this project reached its aim of providing a female space for collective experience (Kata, NEM!, 2020).

After advertising the reading events on social media, those who are interested are added to a mailing list. The specific topics of the events are compiled by first sending out a questionnaire to these women, in which they survey the topics they want to discuss. So far during these reading events they went through topics as everyday sexism, domestic violence, sexual

harassment and violence, women's subordinate reproductive roles which nourish capitalist production, deconstruction of the sexist image of women, romantic relationships and critique of porn industry. These topics are the subject matter of feminist literature which emphasizes women's burdens in capitalist society, and criticizes liberal feminist narratives for their individualistic bias at the expense of collectivity and solidarity. One of the sources that support their is *Nőügyek 2018* by Anikó Gregor and Eszter Kováts, which is a representative study of the most pressing problems for women in today's Hungary. Besides, they also rely on several system critical feminist scholars as Nancy Fraser, Tithi Bhattacharya and Silvia Federici in relation to anti-capitalist feminism and social reproduction (NEM!, Támogató közösséget építeni nők számára, 2018).

A maximum of 15 women can attend a reading event, and those who are on the mailing list can sign up for one occasion. So far, approximately 500 women are on the mailing list. By January, they organized two public reading events a month, from then on once a month. Based on one of the interviews, the reason they organize fewer public reading events is partly the lack of sources, as they aim to put more focus on other activities. Moreover, since they are in the capital, they have limited access to reach out to women who would participate in such events and it is hard to reach beyond a certain group of women from their own medium. In addition, they are not willing to hold reading events outside the urban medium as they do not consider it appropriate to 'go down to the countryside' to make women from lower social status read their feminist literature.

We have limited access to reach out. Women came to our reading events with various social status, but still we have to face that we will not hold reading groups in Nógrád as it is not appropriate to go somewhere else to push through our idea, otherwise we face the lack of source as well (Ágnes, NEM!, 2020).

Consequently, they decided to rather promote the activity of organizing feminist reading groups itself and organize fewer reading events. They spread the idea through a zine called 'How to do a reading group'. As a result, a group of women already began to apply their method on Pécs.

### **II.3.Participatory observation. A reading group event**

I participated in one of NEM!'s reading event. Those, who signed up for the public reading events' mailing list, received a reminder e-mail from NEM! a few days before the event. It contained information of the general characteristics of their reading events, in which it was

described as “a discussion about the cultural products we collectively choose from scholarly texts, literature or movies, which reflect in some way on the social status of women”. They also added that their “aim is to create a solidarity-based environment among women, in addition to self-education and discussion of our own situation’ and due to this, they strive for clarity with more difficult academic texts as well so that the academic skill would not be necessary to understand and comment on it.

The following section of the e-mail was about the assigned text for the occasion. The occasion’s name was ‘Are romantic relationships petty bourgeois?’ (A párkapcsolat kispolgári?) and was based on sections from the book of Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, which is often referred as a basic text of the second wave feminism. The sections of the book question the romanticized role of women in romantic relationships and marriage, which is drawn as an illusion serving male domination. Preliminary issues that structured the event were: *Is love a myth? Are romantic relationships petty bourgeois? Can a feminist get married? Is relationship security a deleterious illusion?* They also assured that the event is worth a visit without prior reading, as in the second half of the session everyone can freely express their views and experience on the given issues through a moderated discussion.

There were sixteen participants in the event, and two members of NEM! who were the moderators of the discussion. The event was two and a half hours long. In a certain way every participant was engaged in social issues through activism, studies, or profession. Although my expectation was that the participants would be mainly from the leftist intellectual activist medium in which NEM! as well is embedded, it was not the tendency.

The discussion and commenting were structured by hand-raising and ‘weighted moderation’ which aimed the equal access to the discussion and non-domination of any participant. It meant that those who commented less during the discussion got to be called earlier than those who commented more. After a short introduction, we agreed on rules for the occasion by voting: not using phone, not interrupting each other, and not sharing others’ thoughts outside the group. After this, there was a group task in which we stood in a circle, and the moderators – who also took part in the game – asked questions and if someone answered yes, had to step one further in the circle. The questions were partly related to social status as ‘Do you think of yourself as one from lower class?’ Other questions were concerned female experience, especially related to romantic relationships, as ‘Do you want to get married someday?’

In the next part, every participant shared their thoughts and feelings in connection with the text, one by one. Meanwhile, one moderator wrote our associations on a board. Apparently, everyone had some criticism or negative feeling about the roles women play in romantic relationships, expressing that it is problematical that women are expected to perform domestic tasks, caregiving and emotional work. In the first round, some women expressed contradictory feelings. They felt that the text blames women who are married or someone's partner, including them, but at the same time, they also felt they agreed when the author described marriage as a romanticized illusion of security in which women have a subordinate role. There were some women who only expressed their agreement with the text but rejected that they would play such subordinate roles like other women. Some women also raised that it is a structural problem that marriage and family is the only way which is shown as the 'way toward security and the fulfillment of life', but it is actually a part of the system's ideology in order to sustain our society's functioning.

After everyone had given their impressions of the text, the conversation became spontaneous. The comments were smooth, there was no silence, everyone had a say in the conversation. The moderators helped to collect and unite our thoughts and experience, subtly hinting that the limited role of women roots in the structure by which women's life is individually defined. The moderators also questioned the reason behind structural determinants of these gender roles, by which the participants gradually concluded that it is in the system's interest to sustain women's reproductive role. When someone emphasized individual responsibility and judgement towards women who stay in 'petty bourgeois' relationships, the moderators tried to highlight the structural nature of oppression, by stressing that people do not necessarily have any possibility to change their status. Even if they have, they do not necessarily notice these possibilities, as what are burdens for them, may be shown as 'socially normal', or 'socially expected', to the extent that their status is determined in society. The Hungarian government's pronatalist social policies, which are backed by the illusion of 'idyllic families' also arose in this context. It led participants to the fact that women from lower classes are even more vulnerable in these reproductive roles. We also discussed that the text can be criticized by the fact that it is cruel with those who are the oppressed as it blames women on fulfilling reproductive roles.

According to my observation, NEM! reached out to women among which engagement in social issues was the common trait. I think, the dynamics that developed at the event were mostly determined by the experience of collectiveness among the women present. During the discussion the feeling of collective female experience among participants occurred, who were

supportive toward each other. In addition, the moderators sought to raise questions that emphasized the structural embeddedness of women's burdens to bring the participants closer to a critical feminist attitude toward capitalism.

As I see, Mellor's and Fraser's feminist critiques contribute to the understanding of the significance of creating such female spaces. Mellor's suggestions on developing "non-oppressive and re-gendered relations" appear in NEM!'s aspirations in this reading events. Moreover, their reading events are also interpretable from Fraser's suggestion on "subaltern counterpublics" as they provide a space for women where they can develop their own voices in a supportive environment without being dominated by the hegemonic views. As in this female space of these reading discussion women's structural oppression is in the main focus, they contribute to the system-critical feminist knowledge within the leftist network.

## Conclusion

In my thesis I analyzed a newly established group called NEM! in the Hungarian capital as system-critical feminist initiative which emerged with the goal to challenge the gendered dynamics of the leftist network in which it is embedded, and to integrate women's structural oppression into the anti-capitalist knowledge production. Ágnes Gagyí's examination of the leftist field in Hungary contributed to my understanding of how to map the activist network in which NEM! is embedded (Gagyí, 2018). In order to explain the activist women's experience in the light of male-dominance and sexism, I relied on feminists' works on gendered power relations within the system-critical activist field (Craddock, 2019; Coleman & Bassi, 2011). I interpreted the emergence of NEM!, as a reaction to these gendered dynamics with Fraser's argument for subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990). Moreover, Mellor's and Fraser's arguments for understanding capitalism with respect to the reproductive sphere proved NEM!'s significance in raising awareness to women's structural oppression within the anti-capitalist field (Mellor, 2019; Fraser, 2016; Fraser, 2014). Some of Fraser's Arruzza's and Bhatthacharya's anti-capitalist feminist claims were mirrored in NEM!'s activism. From the perspective of my research, the parallel is that NEM! is a feminist initiative that concerns a complex understanding of capitalism in its diverse activities, heavily builds on the cooperation with other system-critical initiatives with which it strives to contribute to the leftist field's knowledge on women's structural oppression.

I contend, based on NEM!'s analysis, its narratives, both off-line and online and my participatory observation that NEM! has created a space within the leftist network through which women acting within a space of solidarity and cooperation gain the means to raise their voice concerning women's oppression within the activist field. Their motives to establish NEM! within the leftist network echo Craddock's and Bassi and Coleman's findings on the male-dominated dynamics, sexism and violence against women within activist spaces (Coleman et al. 2011; Craddock 2019). These women's reaction was to get together and create a female space, to think about these experiences without the presence of such oppressive gendered dynamics as everyday sexism, abusive patterns against women and male dominance. As Fraser suggests, they created a "subaltern counterpublic" (Fraser 1990). The role they began to develop within the leftist network can be interpreted as a response to what the feminist critiques emphasized, that the anti-capitalist spaces tend to ignore women's oppression in theory and in practice as well.



As I observed, NEM! achieved success in several cases in their attempt to create a solidarity space for women and raise awareness on several forms of women's oppression. The accounts of the interviewees, as well as my own experience support the finding that their reading group is an effective and well-functioning field towards building a community of solidarity among women, as in that environment women from different activist fields could join and share the same views regarding their female experience. It is remarkable as well, that though tinizine-publishing is a smaller project, therefore its impact is less noticeable, they also attempted to implement anti-capitalist feminism through their publications, in their words, to 'politicize' the teenagers' medium, and through social media as well. As an awareness-raising symbolic charity action, their campaign on female hygiene products seemed to be attractive for women outside the leftist network, though it is less in line with their structural view of feminism. However, I think, is important to note here Fraser's, Arruzza's and Bhatthacharya's concern on anti-capitalist feminism (Arruza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019). This project emphasizes solidarity with women from lower classes, whose experience of being a women differs due to their socioeconomic status. As I see it, in the very early phase of an activist initiative, there is hardly a way to take steps toward more fundamental structural changes, and the symbolic steps to raise awareness to the intersection of class and gender is an important element of anti-capitalist feminism.

NEM!'s diverse, often changing activities, which often rely on the formal and informal connections within the leftist network shows that they have not settled in one exact direction. At first sight, it could be interpreted as a failure or setback to find their specific tools and direction in their activism. However, having a closer look at their system-critical feminist intentions and the importance of their connectedness in the leftist network shows that NEM! primarily want to provide a safe space for women from where the activism without the male-dominance is possible. The diversity of their activities from this angle rather shows that within the leftist network, their role is just emerging. As I see, NEM! is in a constantly changing phase pursuing the best position possible within the leftist network. In addition, it appears that NEM! does not necessarily attempt to highlight women's structural oppression from a specific angle with specific means, but the aim rather is to maintain a female space for the anti-capitalist feminist knowledge in a broad sense. Plus, strengthening solidarity, cooperative functioning and the engagement in anti-capitalist feminism might be more convenient in a female space which practice activism from several angles and sustain an openness to connect and interact with the leftist network in multiple ways.

Based on my findings, I first claim, NEM!'s operation in its current stage contributes to women's ability to actively participate in the leftist knowledge production. Second, NEM! contributes to highlighting women' structural oppression within the anti-capitalist discourse. As I see, NEM!'s significance lies in its role within the leftist network, by which activism is more accessible for women, and women's structural oppression might become more prominent in the anti-capitalist knowledge production.

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