

Adrift on the Periphery: The Alternative Development of Hungarian Women's Organizations in Interwar Transylvania

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This study explores the interwar history of Hungarian women's organizations in Transylvania, focusing on the complex interplay between gender, ethnicity, and politics in the aftermath of the Treaty of Trianon. It examines the foundation and evolution of the Central Secretariat of the Hungarian Minority Women of Romania (RMKNKT) and its affiliated religious and social associations, analyzing how Transylvanian Hungarian women developed alternative, hybrid models of emancipation that blended traditional gender roles with modern political activism.

Through discussion of archival sources from transnational perspectives, the essay traces how Hungarian women in Romania adapted to exclusion from national and international women's organizations by reconfiguring their activism along ethno-religious lines. It devotes particular attention to so-called "railway mission" programs designed to protect women, who were compelled to move among various locations in the country to pursue work, illustrating how these initiatives became vehicles for ethnic self-defense and identity construction.

The study reveals that Hungarian women's activism in interwar Romania cannot simply be categorized as conservative or progressive. Instead, it operated in a liminal space shaped by the constraints of minority status, the failures of multicultural inclusion, and opportunistic engagement with both international and religious networks. This essay contributes to the redefinition of minority women's political subjectivity and highlights how social work and community care were understood in ethnic frameworks.

Keywords: Transylvanian Hungarian women's organizations, interwar, railway mission

“Let’s not take any leadership position in the MANSZ, and let’s not break our unity.”¹ In the spring of 1942, at a meeting of the Transylvanian Catholic Women’s Association, Countess Paula Bethlen² declared the organization’s intent to maintain its autonomous status, thereby rejecting any affiliation with the National Alliance of Hungarian Women, (Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége or MANSZ)³, the biggest national Hungarian women’s association. This statement is surprising in light of the prevailing sentiment following the Second Vienna Award, in the wake of which one would have expected Transylvanian women’s organizations to align themselves with the biggest conservative Hungarian women’s organization. At this meeting, the Association also explained its choice: “Here, for 20 years, associations of all denominations worked in harmony. Let us stay in the shadow of the Church and continue to work there.” As one participant in the meeting commented, “We don’t want to work together because of resentment. We know that unity is strength.”

What events led these women to make this decision? The present study analyzes Hungarian women’s organizations in Transylvania during the interwar period and the roles of women’s welfare activists in ethnic identity politics. The analysis focuses on the establishment of the Central Secretariat of the Romanian Hungarian Minority Women (Romániai Magyar Kisebbségi Nők Központi Titkársága, RMKNKT), which was the primary umbrella organization of the various women’s associations. It traces the trajectories of the process of emancipation after World War I and the ways in which the women’s organizations of an ethnic minority group were able to function in a context in which they had only sporadic and conditional national and international support. This study explores the formation of the minority identity of Hungarian women, with emphasis on the manner in which the construction of femininity was shaped within the daily lives of the Hungarian ethnic community in Transylvania.

There is very little secondary literature on Hungarian women in Transylvania. While significant advancements have been made in eastern Europe concerning the “potential of gender analysis in the wider historical scholarship,”⁴ both

1 Jegyzőkönyv. Felvétel a Kat. Női Misszió 1942. III. hó 17-én tartott választmányi gyűléséről. Katholikus Női Misszió jegyzőkönyve, Főegyházmegyei Levéltár, Kolozsvári Gyűjtőlevéltár, Kolozsvár, 188–91.

2 Known as Countess Bethlen Györgyné (born as Paula Jósika, 1899–1962).

3 Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége (National Alliance of Hungarian Women or MANSZ) was a nationalistic and conservative women’s organization in Hungary in the interwar period, which supported the government’s nationalistic agenda.

4 Bucur, “An Archipelago of Stories,” 1375.

the Romanian and the Hungarian secondary literature has overlooked the experiences of Transylvanian women who belonged to ethnic groups other than the Romanian majority.⁵

While women's associations in Transylvania in the interwar period are occasionally mentioned in some of the scholarship, the works in which they are discussed often lack a sufficiently broad perspective. In some cases, discussions of religious women's organizations are offered in isolation, with a narrow focus on the given confession and little or no consideration of how these organizations related to or interacted with other groups and bodies or, for that matter, the broader sociopolitical context.⁶ This paper addresses this lacuna in the secondary literature by highlighting an underappreciated dimension of national political history and offering an alternative perspective on the ethnic struggle through a women-centered lens.

While the primary objective of this essay is to present new evidence concerning a series of paradoxical developments in the interwar history of Transylvanian Hungarian women's movements, it has also been informed by the study of networks in which these women's organizations were embedded. In the aftermath of the Treaty of Trianon, minority women's organizations found themselves disconnected from both international women's organizations and the feminist movement and also, to a certain extent, from women's associations in Hungary. However, some ties with international religious women's organizations were still kept, albeit in an informal manner. This study will show also that even Romanian organizations were only superficially open to minority women's groups in the interwar period.

As the analysis of organizational linkages offered in the discussion below reveals, in their efforts to maintain official relationships exclusively with national organizations, women's international organizations marginalized newly formed minority organizations in Romania. This led – among other political and social factors – to a narrowing of perspectives and the ethnicization of regional women's

5 Some rare exceptions can be found among Romanian historians, ex., Cosma, "Asociaționismul feminin maghiar," Cosma, "Aspecte privind constituirea și activitatea Secretariatului Central al Femeilor Minoritare Maghiare," Lőnhárt, "Asociațiile femeilor maghiare din Transilvania."

6 For comprehensive discussion of the activity of the Sisters of Social Service and the work of the Unitarian Women and the Reformed Women, see Lengyel, "Nemzetmentők és nemzetrontók"; Farmati, "Szerzetesnők a keresztény feminizmus – a társadalom szolgálatában"; Murányi, "SSS, Szellemben, irányzatban, szeretetben"; Zsakó, "Az unitárius nőmozgalom kialakulása"; Zsakó, *Hinni és tenni*; Bokor, "A csendes szemlélő"; Blos-Jáni, *Belső képek*; Gaal, "De Gerando Antonina"; Püsök, "To Serve with Words, Letters, and Deeds"; Adorjáni, "A nőszövegség és a belmisszió."

organizations. Consequently, the objectives of the progressive organizational program of the RMKNKT shifted toward an ethnic interpretation of social problems. In the absence of any kind of professional or financial support from the state and from international networks, local organizations were obliged to shift their focus from the development of comprehensive, long-term programs to the management of smaller, short-term social issues. This shift is evidenced by the integration of relationships with larger, primarily religious international organizations into the operations of the local women's organizations. The concept of ethnicization, as I approach it in this study, includes both top-down and bottom-up dynamics. The former pertains to state-led categorization, while the latter involves mobilization among minority groups. In my discussion, however, the focus is placed on ethnicity as a dynamic process, rather than on the assumption that ethnic groups can be seen as stable actors. The case study will demonstrate how political, institutional, and network dynamics contribute to ethnicization and the self-determination (and self-interpretation) of a group.⁷

The second part of the article analyzes how the "railway mission," which was an initiative to prevent the exploitation on the labor market of women and girls who felt compelled to move in search of work, was undertaken by religious women's associations. The discussion offers a revealing example of the interconnectedness of various national and international tendencies, organizations, and discourses. A notable aspect of these social programs and discourses concerned ethnically Hungarian women who found themselves pressured to move to seek work. The category of the peasant or working-class woman who sought employment outside the home and therefore encountered an unfamiliar cultural environment (among predominantly Romanian speakers) served as a potent metaphor for interwar Hungarian femininity. According to this discourse, these women needed care, oversight, and supervision. The categories of ethnicity, class, and gender intersected in the context of women who regularly moved in search of work, and these categories were therefore used in the discourses of the "servant-programs" and the railway-mission projects.

The study demonstrates that Hungarian women's activism and the process of emancipation were characterized by a kind of ambivalent or dual politics which embodied both tradition and modernity. Although the Hungarian women's rights activists in Transylvania were familiar with the conservative trends in

7 The following references were considered to be of particular significance in this study of ethnicity: Wimmer, *Ethnic boundary making*; Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*; Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*.

the women's movement in Hungary itself, or what Katalin Sárai Szabó has characterized as “norm-following emancipation,”⁸ the approaches they choose in their politics and the position they adopted was hardly a conscious choice of a group of upper-class women. Furthermore, this position was also influenced by significant external factors.

It is also worth noting that the adoption of conservative values and gender roles did not propel these activists to the extreme right, as was the case in Hungary.⁹ In this sense, the classical dichotomy of left-wing and right-wing women's activism is an oversimplification, at least in the case of this discussion.

Combining the Social and the Political

In the wake of World War I, the former activities undertaken by Hungarian women from Transylvania in the social sphere were supplemented by new public roles in the domain of ethnopolitical mobilization, which had economic, political, educational, and cultural dimensions.¹⁰ This shift led to the renegotiation of the position of these women beyond the confines of the philanthropic framework. As Ella Kauntz Engel, a Unitarian women's rights activist, noted in her comments on the importance of gender equality within the Church,

Our goal, of course, is complete equality, but we know that this cannot be achieved overnight. Today, we are not yet sufficiently self-aware and disciplined. In the early stages of our movement, we are essentially just searching for ways to begin moving toward this goal. Our situation is made more difficult by the fact that our so-called work to date has been limited to begging and organizing entertainment. These things are necessary, but we must now prove that we are capable of more than just organizing buffets.¹¹

This was in line with international trends and broader global developments linked to women's employment and professionalization after World War I. In the wake of the war, the political and cultural climate reinforced traditional gender roles, according to which women were the “mothers of the nation,” tasked with ensuring the biological and cultural reproduction of ethnic groups. They were

8 Sárai Szabó, “Normakövető női emancipáció”; Papp and Sipos, *Modern, diplomás nő a Horthy-korban*.

9 See Pető, “The Rhetoric of Weaving and Healing.”

10 Bokor, “Minority femininity at intersections”; Bokor, “A székely Nagyasszony testőrei.”

11 Kauntzné Engel, “A nőmozgalom nálunk,” 208.

also seen as the guardians of morality and the reproductive vessels of “pure” ethnic lineage. This period, however, also came with very strong transnational influences, and powerful women's alliances and leagues emerged which fought for the rights of women.

A close examination of the brief yet profoundly turbulent period reveals substantial transformations in the nature and significance of women's associations in Europe. A global functional shift had occurred in the conceptualizations of social work and social activism, with women emerging as the primary agents of social transformation. As English poet and philosopher Denise Riley has argued, “this new production of ‘the social’ offered a magnificent occasion for the rehabilitation of ‘women’. In its very founding conceptions, it was feminized; in its detail, it provided the chances for some women to enter upon the work of restoring other, more damaged, women to a newly conceived sphere of grace.”¹²

The secondary literature on gender and social reforms in eastern Europe reveals significant changes in women's associations as they evolved to address shifting societal conditions and priorities.¹³ In the prewar period, most of the women's associations focused on charitable works, addressing issues such as poverty, education, and public health. These efforts were often framed as extensions of women's domestic roles. After World War I, many associations shifted from charitable aid to advocacy for systemic change. They began addressing structural inequalities and campaigning for legal reforms, including labor rights, suffrage, and family law. Women's associations became more professional and institutionalized in their structure. As they engaged directly with state governments and international institutions, such as the League of Nations, they influenced policies on issues such as trafficking, education, and gender equality.

Consequently, women were not only the actors but also the objects of these social actions. Voluntary charitable work began to shift. In their social work and reform efforts, women aspired to do more than simply extend their roles and traditional responsibilities in the private intimate space of the home to the public sphere. At the same time, opportunities for professionalization were created. As Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe have argued, “women were expected to take responsibility for healing the wounds of war,” which “could provide opportunities for women to break away from traditional restrictions and

12 Riley, *Am I that name?* 48.

13 Fell and Sharp, *The women's movement in wartime*; Kuhlman, *Reconstructing patriarchy*; Wingfield and Bucur, *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*.

make a significant and meaningful contribution to cultural demobilization in the war's aftermath.”¹⁴

There was a discernible shift in the activities of Transylvanian Hungarian women's organizations following the war and the Treaty of Trianon. This shift was prompted in part by an expansion in membership to encompass women from diverse social classes and an engagement in the ethnic struggles of the newly formed ethnic minority.

Before World War I, the Hungarian women's associations in Transylvania had primarily functioned as local philanthropic organizations. They were small entities engaged in sporadic support activities, occasionally under the auspices of a church or in affiliation with larger Hungarian umbrella organizations, such as the Hungarian Federation of Women's Associations (Magyar Nőegyesületek Szövetsége), the National Association of Women's Welfare Workers (Nőtisztviselők Országos Egyesülete), and the Feminist Association (Feminista Egyesület). This involvement also led to affiliations with prominent international organizations, such as the International Council of Women (ICW) and the International Women Suffrage Alliance (IWSA).¹⁵ There was no common Transylvanian Hungarian ethnic platform, as there was no need for such a platform.

After the Treaty of Trianon, the Hungarian community in Transylvania sought to rebuild its political and institutional framework through the Hungarian Party (Országos Magyar Párt, OMP). Instead of a fully developed institutional background, they relied on key pillars, such as churches, political organizations, and cultural-economic institutions. This broader ethnic program also led to the formation of new Hungarian women's associations, many rooted in prewar charity work. These women's organizations, in addition to their ongoing social and cultural initiatives, underwent a marked politicization in response to the repressive policies of the Romanian state. A key turning point was the 1924 primary education law, which mandated Romanian as the language of instruction, effectively marginalizing Hungarian-language education. The 1925 private education law further limited the use of Hungarian in schools and exams, which left Hungarian students at a disadvantage. The Romanian Civil Code of 1865, furthermore, stripped married women of legal rights, rights that were previously granted under Hungarian law in Transylvania. In response, Hungarian women

14 Sharp and Stibbe, “Introduction,” 20.

15 On Hungarian women's activism and their networks, see Fedeles-Czeferner, *Nőmozgalom, nemzetköziség, önreprézenciáció* and Szapor, *Hungarian Women's Activism in the Wake of the First World War*.

began organizing to challenge these restrictions, marking a shift toward gender-based activism within the minority rights movement.¹⁶ Romanian authorities frequently imposed restrictions on the social activities of Hungarian women, and on multiple occasions, did not authorize their meetings or charitable endeavors.

In order to function more efficiently, smaller local women's religious groups merged into larger, regional, Transylvanian associations. In 1922, the Unitarian Women's Association was re-established. In August 1926, the Transylvanian Catholic Women's Association was founded, followed by the foundation of the Reformed Women's Association in November 1927. After they succeeded in registering as a distinct legal entity, the Hungarian Lutheran women founded the Hungarian Lutheran Women's Association in 1935.

The initial organizational stages were characterized by a pronounced articulation of the objectives of this transformative era and their conception of the shifts in women's public role, women's political significance, and the need to integrate into international organizational frameworks. As Ella Engel,¹⁷ a Unitarian, observed in her comments about the importance of women's rights in the Unitarian Church,

Our movement, at this initial stage, is really just a search for how to begin to move towards this goal. The situation is made more difficult by the fact that our so-called work so far has been exhausted in begging and entertaining. We need these activities too, but we must now prove that we can do more than just organize buffets.¹⁸

Writer Irén P. Gulácsy¹⁹ expressed similar views:

The new home, the new society, and the new state have to be made habitable and have to be made acceptable for men, the family, and the community. It is the woman's job to do this. [...] While we are laboring on this artwork, half of the women's energy is used for society. When the opus will be ready, women will have time again to turn to themselves and their families until a new earthquake comes.²⁰

16 See Bokor, "Minority femininity at intersections."

17 Known as Dr. Kauntz Józsefné, born Ella Engel (1890–1956).

18 Kauntzné Engel, "A nőmozgalom nálunk," 208.

19 Irén P. Gulácsy (1894–1945).

20 Gulácsy, "A nő a politikában," 143.

A general sympathy for emancipation was in the air. Even “conservative” religious women felt that they needed to be present in politics. This was arguably something of a hybrid form of emancipation,²¹ which has been given different terms in the secondary literature, such as “norm-following emancipation”²² or “mother-based feminism.”²³ These terms refer to the efforts and aspirations of a group of women who derived their roles from their status as wives and performed traditionally female tasks yet were actively involved in various social policies and sought to improve the social status of women.

This norm-following emancipatory model served as a paradigm for Transylvanian Unitarian, Reformed, and Catholic women, who emphasized the importance of community service, societal contributions, and the promotion of moral and intellectual education, including women’s education, yet pursued these goals in a different manner. As noted in an earlier study,²⁴ their approach was both opportunistic and realistic. In the interwar period, these women experienced a loss of social, economic, and cultural influence. They underwent a shift from a dominant position to a new minority situation, they experienced forms of state repression.

The mid 1920s represented an important period for Transylvanian women, as it was the first historical moment in which they were able to wield significant influence in the political sphere. Their actions were characterized by a deliberate and strategic approach based on self-organization and policymaking. Beyond issues such as education and the protection of Hungarian language (which had become the language of an ethnic minority in the new Romanian state), women’s activism assumed novel roles, including, for instance, responsibility for the maintenance of the community’s newly delineated boundaries. This shift signified a political commitment rather than a mere personal interest or recreational pursuit.²⁵

21 Studies on the controversies among Hungarian women activists after the war: Pető, *Napasszonyok és holdkisasszonyok*; Szapor, “Who Represents Hungarian Women?”; Szapor, *Hungarian Women’s Activism in the Wake of the First World War*; Pető and Szapor, “Women and ‘the alternative public sphere.’”

22 Sári Szabó, “Normakövető női emancipáció”; Papp and Sipos, *Modern, diplomás nő a Horthy-korban*.

23 Fábri, *A szép tiltott táj felé*, 173–74.

24 Bokor, “Minority Femininity at Intersections.”

25 Ibid.

The Romanian Model and the Role of Alexandrina Cantacuzino in the Processes of Self-Organization

In the aftermath of the war, Romanian women's organizations, which were predominantly charitable and religious associations, underwent a substantial integration into the public municipal welfare apparatus. Women began to assert themselves as experts in the field of social reforms and lay experts on the women's question.²⁶ These organizations had international connections, and in the early 1920s, they began to receive considerable subsidies from the central government. One of the main figures of this period was Alexandrina Cantacuzino (1876–1944), the leader of the National Council of Romanian Women (Consiliul Național al Femeilor Române, CNFR).²⁷ Cantacuzino was also elected Vice President of the ICW in Washington in 1925. The election of Alexandrina Cantacuzino was justified on the grounds that Romanian women made significant contributions to the resolution of conflicts among ethnic groups in southeastern Europe. Notably, at this conference Cantacuzino, was regarded as “the first woman in Europe to be concerned with the problem of minorities.”²⁸ It remains an open question whether the election of Cantacuzino as Vice President of the ICW was a gesture intended by the international organization to promote peace, a strategic step towards the consolidation of the Transylvanian situation, or just a political step taken by an uninformed institution which was not up to date on the circumstances in this region or the complete absence of interaction between minority women in Transylvania on the one hand and women in the rest of Romania on the other. However, letters expressing discontent from women in minority groups in Romania prompted the ICW to request information regarding the situation there. In her response, Cantacuzino delivered a lecture on the Hungarian aristocracy's unjust protests against the nationalization of its estates.²⁹ This evasive response reveals both her nationalistic perspective on the issues and also her limited understanding of the activities of the Hungarians, including women, residing in Transylvania.

In a similar organization known as the Little Entente of Women (a transnational umbrella organization for women's groups in southeastern Europe),

26 Ghiț, “Loving Designs.”

27 See Bucur, “The Little Entente of Women”; Cheșchebec, “The “Unholy Marriage””; Mihăilescu, “Introducere.”

28 See Mihăilescu, “Introducere,” 51.

29 See Cantacuzino, *Conferința asupra călătoriei în America*, Mihăilescu, “Introducere,” 51.

where Cantacuzino also played a significant role as president, it was considered the primary responsibility of women's associations and gatherings to contribute, through their unique methods, to the resolution of conflicts and tensions arising from the question of minorities in the successor states. Delegates to the Athens Conference (1925) denounced the actions of states that remained discontent with the terms of the Versailles Peace Treaty, particularly with regard to the alleged "persecution of ethnic minorities" in Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and other states. This issue was a recurrent theme in various international forums and congresses, including those specifically dedicated to women's issues. In alignment with their professed democratic principles, the women of the Little Entente of Women wanted to ensure the intellectual and economic advancement of minority groups, contingent upon their demonstrated allegiance to the state in which they resided.

Upon returning from Washington, Cantacuzino puts forth a proposal for a rapprochement with minority groups. This proposal can be understood as an act that was intended on her part to give her legitimacy in her new influential international position. In *Universul*, a Romanian newspaper that enjoyed widespread circulation, Cantacuzino articulated her perspective on the state's minority communities. She placed emphasis on the expectation that minority communities are obligated to demonstrate loyalty to the state. She also insisted that the state could not be expected to provide support and services for these communities without such loyalty. The notion of loyalty was a recurring theme in her subsequent speeches and writings on minority issues³⁰.

On October 25, 1925, Cantacuzino organized a special meeting with the "associations of minority women."³¹ A delegation of 75 associations, including Hungarian, Saxon, Jewish, and Ukrainian minority women's associations from Transylvania, Bucovina, and Banat traveled to Bucharest for the meeting.

The associations originating from Hungarian communities, however, did not identify themselves, in their names, as ethnic organizations. Instead, they identified themselves as religious or philanthropic associations. This stands in contrast to the Saxon women's association, which explicitly identified themselves as Saxon associations. It is particularly interesting to note the position of the Jewish women's association at this meeting. Jewish associations from Hungarian-speaking communities identified Hungarian as their mother tongue and requested

30 Cantacuzino, "Drepturile minoritatilor."

31 Activitate politică socială, Alexandrina Cantacuzino. ANR SANIC, fond Familial Cantacuzino, Inv. 1860, dosar 63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 76.

schooling in Hungarian for their children (e.g., the Jewish Women's Association from Satu-Mare (Szatmár))³² Although some local Jewish organizations were represented by their own deputies at the meeting, in many cases, local Jewish women's associations were represented by Catholic or Protestant delegates. For instance, the women's associations of various denominations in Turda (Torda), such as the Jewish Women's Association, the Jewish Women's Association for Orphans, the Roman Catholic Altar Society, and the "Elizabeth" Women's Benevolent Society, were represented by Mária Bethlen.³³ The same was true of the delegates from Cluj (Kolozsvár). Paula Bethlen, the representative of the Catholic women of Cluj, was also appointed as a delegate for the Jewish Women of Cluj, Țirgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely), and Șimleul Silviei (Szilágysomlyó).³⁴ Following the meeting, however, collaboration in this form came to an end. Several questions arise. What took place at the meeting? How was womanhood as part of a minority community understood by the Romanian majority? What new models of womanhood emerged within the Hungarian, Saxon, Jewish, and other minority communities, and how were these models intertwined with understandings of ethnic and minority identity?

The objectives of the meeting were many and varied. The general and idealistic purpose was to cultivate collaborative ties between majority and minority women's associations and to foster a deeper understanding among ethnic groups. It was also intended as a platform for deliberating matters deemed crucial to the social status of women in Romania. It was further asserted that the Romanian partners would serve as a mediator between the Romanian authorities and minority ethnic women's organizations. For the Romanian hosts, there was a strategic ambition to consolidate their existing network of female constituents. As such, the establishment of a unified multicultural platform could also be perceived as a legitimizing act in the eyes of the international women organizations and the League of Nations (as an indication that the women's organizations in Romania were attentive to minorities), since Cantacuzino was also involved in the discussion of minority rights in the League of Nations and other international feminist organizations. What was the purpose of the participation of the Hungarian and other minority groups at the conference? First and foremost, they hoped that by strengthening ties with the Romanian women's organizations, they could draw some attention to the problems faced by

32 ANR SANIC, fond Familial Cantacuzino, Inv. 1860, dosar 67. 5–7.

33 Proces verbal. ANR SANIC, fond Familial Cantacuzino, Inv. 1860, dosar 71, 9–10.

34 ANR SANIC, fond Familial Cantacuzino, Inv. 1860, dosar 72.

ethnic minority communities and also establish connections with international women's organizations through the Romanian National Council of Women.

In her invitation letter sent to the participants, Cantacuzio mentioned that they would be permitted to speak “only about issues related to the protection of children, social assistance, the protection of mothers, and the problems related to the education of children, because these are the problems women are concerned about.”³⁵ It is clear that some of the major elements of this minority womanhood were defined already here, and the “guardian angels of the home”³⁶ had been empowered to act at higher levels. Through this meeting and through the National Council of Romanian Women, which appeared to function as a neutral, non-state institution, the state itself could reinforce its views of the qualities of womanhood and thus could shape understandings of the foundations of women's allegedly natural or proper responsibilities.

It is obvious also that, on behalf of the national (Romanian) majority, the primary objective of the meeting was to promote awareness regarding the status of minorities and to clarify the hierarchy between the ruling elite and the ethnic and national minorities. The event provided a valuable opportunity for Cantacuzino to articulate her understanding of the minority identity of women of other nationalities and to underscore the distinctions between dominant and subordinate subjects and delineate ethnic boundaries.

The Category of Minority as a Force to Self-Organize: The Formation of the RMKNKT

The positive consequence of the 1925 meeting was the founding of the aforementioned RMKNKT, the largest Hungarian women's organization in Romania. The Secretariat was founded within a few weeks of the conference. The initiative was based on the conviction that “womanhood will save the future.” It was hoped that, through collaborative efforts with a prominent Romanian women's organization, significant advancements would be made. The organization's establishment was clearly predicated on the expectation that it would benefit from the support of the CNFR:

35 Cantacuzino, “Organizarea de întruniri.”

36 Cantacuzino, “Cuvântarea Doamnei Cantacuzino.”

We decided, in accordance with the discussions with the National Council of Romanian Women, to establish a center of Hungarian women's associations in Transylvania and in Romania, with its headquarters in Cluj. The aim of this center is to establish and maintain direct contact with the Romanian National Council of Women. The members of the center are the women whom Countess Bethlen announced at the congress under this title. In addition, members are to be sent by the local centers to be established in each town.³⁷

The idea of establishing a more substantial organization to unite smaller women's organizations, however, had been raised before this event. In January 1922, the "women of Cluj" approached the Hungarian government, seeking support for the Transylvanian welfare institutions that had been neglected by the newly established state.³⁸ This request included the establishment of a "center of charity institutions." However, the Hungarian government deemed it beyond its capacity to engage in this revitalization process.³⁹ This center actually took its final form in 1925, after the Minority Women's Congress.

Following the conference, a clear decision was made to collaborate with other minority women:

A center of women's associations of the various minorities in Transylvania and the whole of Romania will also be established. The establishment of this center will be prepared by a committee to be sent by the center in Cluj. The deadline for sending in the declaration of affiliation of the establishment of the local centers is December 1, 1925.⁴⁰

The initial project was predicated on this imagined community of "loving womanhood," and it regarded the problems faced by all minority women living in Romania as a common issue that needed to be solved. Consequently, a significant collaborative effort was launched by Transylvanian Saxon, Ukrainian, Jewish, and Hungarian women. Later, the formation of the RMKNKT was preceded by a series of negotiations between the representatives of Hungarian women (Polixénia Huszár and Paula Bethlen) and Saxon women (Lotte Binder

37 *Brassói Lapok*, "Tíz perces beszélgetés Bukarestet megjárt hölgyeinkkel."

38 Kolozsvári nők kérése. Társadalmi Szervezetek Központja iratai, MNL OL K 437 1921-1-398.

39 It is not clear whether the Hungarian government helped them or not. Huszár and Bethlen lobbied continuously for financial support for women's organizations in Cluj, and in 1928-1929 the RMKNKT received 15,000 lei from the Hungarian government. See Bárdi, *Ottthon és hazra*, 440.

40 *Brassói Lapok*, "Tíz perces beszélgetés Bukarestet megjárt hölgyeinkkel."

as the federal leader of the Free Saxon Women's Association). Hungarian leaders approached Saxon women at the conference with the idea of creating a minority women platform. This was meant to be a collective/cooperative initiative, rather than an act of isolation or a closing of ranks. The German and Hungarian women's relationship was more or less personal and not professional, but their aim was to work together on all issues affecting their perceived common interests.⁴¹ Although a large minority women's association was never actually founded, there were strong ties between the Saxon and the Hungarian women during this period. The aforementioned Lotte Binder was present at the first congress of the RMKNKT. There was also a joint campaign to reintroduce German and Hungarian as languages at midwifery schools in Sibiu (Nagyszeben) and Cluj and some joint protest actions against the new Law of Religion.⁴²

Transylvanian Saxon women offered a clear model of a functioning minority women's organization. As they had been active as members of minority organizations before World War I, they were able to exemplify not only strategies necessary for survival but also techniques with which to maintain close ties with international organizations.⁴³ The attempt to establish a multiethnic women's association proved unsuccessful. Saxon women expressed a preference for collaborating on specific issues without affiliating themselves with some unified platform. Consequently, the RMKNK was founded and it was a mono-ethnic organization, like the Association of Free Saxon Women.

41 Schiel, *Frei – politisch – sozial*.

42 'Legea pentru regimul general al Cultelor', *Monitorul Oficial*, 89 (22 April 1928), 979–92. From 1928, according to the new Law on Religion, if parents were not of the same religion, the father had the right to determine which religion each child would be. This contradicted the old Transylvanian legal custom, according to which parents agreed on the religion of their children before their marriage. Usually, the boy followed the father's religion and the girl the mother's. This law also stated that in the case of orphans, if there was no indication of their parents' religion, and if the orphanage that housed them was maintained by the state, they must follow the Orthodox religion. Female activists suggested that this law did not support equality between husband and wife. These protests represented a possible way to rethink and reevaluate women's social and civil rights in society.

43 Lotte Binder was a member of the leadership of World Union of Women for International Concord (WUWIC), an organization with a large number of Saxon members. This enthusiasm may be due to the support from the Romanian Helene Romniciano, the secretary of the WUWIC in Geneva, who maintained a fruitful relationship with some Saxon women activists, Ida Servatius and Adele Zay. Also Rominicano helped them take part in the other organization, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The Saxon women's association did not affiliate itself with this latter organization, however, because Adele Zay felt that "the League practices cosmopolitanism, whose principles, especially the philo-Semitic direction, we cannot adopt completely as our own." Saxon women therefore remained individual members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Schiel, *Frei – politisch – sozial*, 384.

The RMKNKT comprised at least one hundred local groups, predominantly from Transylvania and Banat. Participating religious women's associations in Transylvania, predominantly supported by their churches, were formed and gathered strength.

Religious associations and former charity organizations formed the cornerstone of the RMKNKT's organizational structure. They included the Social Mission Society, which later formed its "movement association," the Catholic Women's Association, the Unitarian Women's Association, and several Lutheran and Calvinist women's associations. Although prior to 1925, Jewish women had maintained a significant collaborative relationship with Hungarian women, they did not engage with this ethnic women's umbrella organization. The RMKNKT was created by a group of upper-middle class women, many of them members of the aristocracy, complemented by a significant presence of middle-class intellectuals. The Central Secretariat was led by the Catholic Paula Bethlen, the Reformed Polixénia Huszár, the Unitarian Aranka Mikó, and the Lutheran Margit Mannsberg. In 1928, there was an inaugural congress of the Central Secretariat, where Paula Bethlen underscored the fundamental principle of women's organizations: "All female solidarity has a higher intrinsic value, and the large community that exists among all women, always and under all circumstances, provides a strong foundation. This community is the great love that lives in women's hearts, the sacred harmony of motherhood, and its connecting power."⁴⁴ This concept of love as an essential and defining element of womanhood entailed the notion that women possessed the capacity to redress prevailing societal abnormalities and thereby create novel ethical norms and forms of charity.

The activities of the Central Secretariat encompassed a wide range of social initiatives, including the provision of care for children, orphans, servants, and the sick, the protection of women, and the fight against trafficking in girls. The RMKNKT participated in the railway mission in the larger Romanian cities, organized courses in mother, child, and infant protection, and helped set up medical centers for infant protection. It also supported rural agricultural education lessons (maintaining cottage industries to support Hungarian girls at home and providing various economic training courses), and it launched medical assistant and midwife training in Hungarian. However, the Central Secretariat was also involved in various protests. It held protests, for instance, in support

44 [Bethlen], "Gróf Bethlen Györgyné előadása."

of Hungarian-language schools and against the religious law and the civil code (together with other Romanian and Saxon feminists).

The relationship with the CNFR was neither long-lasting nor particularly deep. It was marked, rather, by a certain superficiality, encompassing only a limited number of issues that it could meaningfully address. Cantacuzino's antagonistic perspectives became particularly pronounced later, in 1937, when she began to use exclusionary rhetoric in Cluj and thus aligned herself with right-wing political ideologies.⁴⁵ This discourse accentuated the concept of "otherness" and the notion of treating members of minority groups as subordinates or second-class citizens. It thus harmonized well with the prevailing priorities of the Romanian majority.⁴⁶ In response to Huszár's accusation that she had made a statement intended to cause harm to Hungarians, Cantacuzino offered an explanation, stating that her remarks were not directed at the Hungarian population. A close reading of the speech, however, reveals an underlying sentiment of fear and xenophobia, which likely contributed to the disappointment experienced by Hungarian women.

Ethnic Politicization

By the mid 1920s and the establishment of the RMKNKT, the roles of women as members of an ethnic or national minority had become openly politicized, as their forms of activism were also reactions to the state's repressive policies towards the given minority community.⁴⁷ The social activities of these women's organizations were constrained by a markedly repressive state and the status of marginalized minority, which was a product of the prevailing political climate.⁴⁸ As a result, concerns that had previously been regarded exclusively as social issues subsequently evolved into matters of ethnic concern, including the wellbeing of Hungarian mothers and infants, the education of Hungarian children, and the rights of Hungarian servants and peasants.

The trend of ethnicization had occurred among other ethnic women's organizations in Transylvania before World War I. Romanian historians

45 On Cantacuzino's nationalism, see Bucur, "The Little Entente of Women."

46 For the printed version of the speech, see Cantacuzino, "Străinii ca factor politic." ANR SANIC, Cantacuzino family documents, dossier 61.

47 A similar tendency has been observed among other ethnic communities in Europe with regard to the participation of women in public life and the goals of their struggles. See Żarnowska, "Women's Political Participation."

48 See Bokor, "Minority Femininity at Intersections."

have observed a similar pattern among Romanian women's organizations in Transylvania before 1919.⁴⁹ According to Oana Sînziana Păltineanu, "The Romanian women's movement in Hungary developed gradually and in close relation to the Romanian nation-building project in the dual monarchy. As such, the growing Romanian women's movement sought to improve women's situation within the conceptual frame of the nation, in opposition to the ruling elite and nation in Hungary."⁵⁰ Saxon women also took part in their community's ethnic survival and their ethnic politics, and they were engaged in a significant amount of emancipatory work and possessed a more complex institutional background in comparison to their Romanian counterparts.⁵¹

The church and political elites also strengthened the role of women in fighting for the rights of their national communities. The Hungarian National Party (Országos Magyar Párt, OMP), which represented the Hungarian community in the Romanian parliament, also supported women's associations. As the new law on the organization of public administration, enacted on August 3, 1929, had granted certain categories of women the right to vote and the right to be elected to the municipal and county councils, the OMP required women's support in the 1930 local elections. Hungarian women were mobilized to participate in the OMP electoral lists, and their participation in public life received more attention than ever before. Something similar occurred among Saxon women. They were mobilized by efforts within their community to represent the Saxons as a national minority, and Saxon women were profoundly implicated in this process. As demonstrated by a speech held by Saxon women's leader Ida Servatius in 1929, there was also a prevailing mistrust of women who belonged to national minorities with regard to the Romanian elections.⁵²

Due to the strong support of the OMP, the mobilization of Hungarian women in Cluj was much more effective than the efforts to mobilize Romanian women:

The Hungarians are making a big propaganda effort to include women in the electoral lists. The Hungarian Party carried out the formalities of enrolment, and by the time 600 to 700 minority women had enrolled, Romanian women were still completely absent. Later, the ruling party

49 Păltineanu, "Converging Suffrage Politics"; Bucur, "The Little Entente of Women"; Szapor, *Hungarian Women's Activism*.

50 Păltineanu, "Converging Suffrage Politics," 57.

51 See Schiel, *Frei – politisch – sozial*.

52 Schiel, "Was haben wir vom Frauenwahlrecht zu erwarten?"

went from house to house, office to office, and enrolled some women voters.⁵³

Notably, the political mobilization of Hungarian women in Transylvania resulted in the assumption of additional roles and responsibilities by these women in the economic, political, educational, and cultural spheres.

This group evidenced a high degree of mobility, making it a social group that was particularly susceptible to mobilization efforts. Indeed, its presence in public life reached an unprecedented level during the period.

In March 1930, at the general meeting of the “electing Hungarian women,” Baroness Huszár,⁵⁴ expounded on the significance of women’s suffrage, urging Hungarian women to exercise their democratic right in a manner that would elevate the standing of the entire Hungarian nation.⁵⁵

Previously, in January she published an article on this subject, explaining the importance of elections for women.

The present and the future demand that we spare no effort and consider it our duty to exercise our rights in the interests of humanity in general and of our Hungarian race in particular. Hungarian women must remember that their votes double the number of Hungarian votes. Our schools, our kindergartens, the cleaning of our streets, the establishment of hospitals, and many other tasks aimed at promoting the wellbeing of our people all await the work of women. [...] Once again, we urge everyone not to fail to apply, but to do their part in the sacred duty that falls upon us Hungarian women.⁵⁶

Women regarded the right to vote as being of paramount importance, not only as an equal right for women but also as a means with which to achieve success on the ethnic stage. Hungarian women understood their involvement in politics within an ethnic context, as evidenced by the actions of the Hungarian women of Sighetul Marmăției (Máramarosziget), who refused to participate in a women’s bloc with other ethnic women to secure the election of women to the city council. Instead, these women supported the OMP.⁵⁷

Huszár’s speech for the 1930 local elections exemplifies the intertwining of conservative and progressive values, thereby elucidating the role of women.

53 “A községi választások esélyei Kolozsváron”; *Universul*, “Alegerile comunale la Cluj.”

54 Known as Huszár Pálné baroness (born as Nemes Polixéna, 1882–1963).

55 *Keleti Újság*, “A kolozsvári választás fontos erőpróbája a román nemzeti-parasztpártnak.”

56 *Keleti Újság*, “Szükséges-e a magyar nőknek a választásokon aktív szerepet vállalni?”

57 *Szamos*, “Az mszigeti nők első politikai megmozdulása.”

In her call to action, she insisted that, "Once again, we urge you not to neglect your civic duty: contribute to the sacred responsibility that falls upon us Hungarian women."⁵⁸

The involvement of women in the international politics of the Hungarian community is also worthy of mention. The United Nations Association of Hungarians from Romania (Romániai Magyar Népliga Egyesület), which was affiliated with the World Federation of United Nations Associations, played an instrumental role in the facilitation of the Hungarian community's involvement with the League of Nations. Established in 1927, the organization was headquartered in Cluj and was under the leadership of Huszár, who served vice president.⁵⁹

The RMKNKT's International Network

With the cessation of hostilities, we Hungarian women, along with the dissolution of our nation, were dealt a devastating blow that overwhelmed us, leaving us no time or inclination to engage with the organizations and activities of women from other nations and the recently established global federations of women.⁶⁰

Huszár made these remarks at the inaugural congress of the RMKNKT, offering a noteworthy perspective on the organization's international relations.

Although initially the RMKNKT's aspirations extended beyond the horizon of mere local and regional connections, the status of Hungarian women as members of a national minority in a country that was nominally a nation state hampered their efforts to build the networks they had envisioned. Delegates and figures at the international level had to be women representing self-governing nation states or federal states in a multinational empire, so women from minority ethnic and national groups had difficulty participating in international organizations.⁶¹

The RMKNKT's 1928 Congress offers a clear illustration of the efforts of the organization to become more active, effective, and visible and also to extend

58 *Keleti Újság*, "Szükséges-e a magyar nőknek a választásokon aktív szerepet vállalni?"

59 See Sulyok, "Az erdélyi magyarság nemzetközi kapcsolatai," 87–89; "A Romániai Magyar Népliga-Egyesület tisztikara és alapszabályai."

60 Huszár Pálné, "A Magyar Nők Központi Titkárságának megalakulása és működése," 21.

61 See Zimmermann, "The Challenge of Multinational Empire"; Grubački and Selišnik, "The National Women's Alliance in interwar Yugoslavia."

its network and foster relations with similar organizations. One key aspect of its strategic vision was to maintain connections with other minority organizations and Romanian women and also to gain access to international organizations that could provide solutions to the problems faced by minority women.⁶² At the 1928 congress, Paula Bethlen delivered an extensive and detailed account of these organizations (the text was published in the journal *Magyar Kisebbség* (Hungarian Minority) but was also featured in the daily press).⁶³ Bethlen also contended that it is almost impossible for a minority organization to participate in international movements:

If we study the statutes of the large women's organizations, we see that they place an extremely high emphasis on national frameworks, to the extent that some of them may even go too far in this area, because they proclaim, comparing nation and state, that they will only accept one organization from a country as their members. The postwar peace treaties created approximately 40 million people in Europe who belong to minority communities, and these people are excluded from some international women's organizations.

The organization's first collaborative effort was undertaken with the International Co-operative Women's Guild (or ICWG), when the Guild started to initiate cooperative programs for Hungarian women. Alice Honora Enfield,⁶⁴ the secretary of the organization, visited Romania, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union in 1928. In Transylvania, she gave a lecture on economics within the Hangya cooperatives.⁶⁵ Although the methods used by the ICWG to facilitate cohesion among women through household activities aligned with some of the perspectives articulated by the RMKNKT, this collaborative endeavor was relatively brief in duration.

There was also a strong urge on behalf of the minority organizations to collaborate with the ICW. The hopes of winning Ishbel Hamilton-Gordon, Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair and an internationally prominent advocate of women's rights (known perhaps most succinctly as Lady Aberdeen), over to the minority issue were not fulfilled. Both the Saxon and the Hungarian women's

62 The minority society closely followed international feminist activism (In 1927, *Korunk* published an article by the Hungarian feminist Vilma Glücklich on international women's organizations. Glücklich, "Nemzetközi nőmozgalom a háború után").

63 [Bethlen], "Gróf Bethlen Györgyné előadása"

64 On the activity of ICWG, see Tešija, "Millions of working housewives."

65 Bethlen Györgyné, "A külföldi nagy nőegyesületek."

organizations were persistently trying to become members of the ICW, but they were not even allowed to attend the women's congress.⁶⁶

Hungarian women leaders (including Polixénia Huszár, Mária Bethlen) were present in Bucharest at the reception of the delegation of the ICW, a reception organized by Alexandrina Cantacuzino. The delegation was also present in Braşov (Brassó) when Alexandrina Cantacuzino visited the city with Lady Aberdeen, where Cantacuzino was expected to present also the Saxon and Hungarian women's associations to Aberdeen.⁶⁷ On this occasion, Aberdeen visited the Saxon women's and children's protection institutions in Braşov and also received the greetings of the Hungarian women's associations.⁶⁸ The extent to which the presence of minority women served as a tool for the CNFR and for Cantacuzino for her own professional prestige and international standing remains a topic of speculation. It is also clear that the parade of women's organizations upon Lady Aberdeen's arrival was intended to serve as evidence of a well-functioning, fruitful relationship between the majority and minority women's associations.

In an interview in 1930, Polixénia Huszár summarized the place of the RMKNKT on Romanian and international platforms with less optimism. She also observed that the relationship between the organization and the CNFR was two-faced:

Madame Cantacuzene, pronounces Mrs. Huszár with a French accent, is undoubtedly a pioneer of every international movement, but she is also a great Romanian woman. In Bucharest, she is considered an excellent patriot who stands up for Romanian national interests even in a more international movement. She, on the other hand, knows very well that I am also fighting for the establishment of international relations, and I am 100 percent committed to my own national interests. I stand by my thinking. But that is precisely why we understand and respect each other on this point. In any case, our situation is extremely difficult in terms of participating in an international movement, because in Bucharest they would like us to do it through them if we have grievances that they might want to bring to an international social forum. It is a bizarre situation: those who present grievances against whom the grievance is directed. However, Princess Cantacuzino would like us to have no grievances... But after all, she is only one voice in this still noisy jungle.⁶⁹

66 Schiel, *Frei – politisch – sozial*, 398.

67 *Brassói Lapok*, "Magyar asszonyok munkája."

68 *Brassói Lapok*, "Aberdeen márkinő Brassóban."

69 Ligeti, "Látogatás Kolozsvár vezető asszonyainál."

How Huszár have achieved her aspirations for international relations in this short, tense period? In practice, the RMKNKT was able to mobilize only those international organizations to which it had access through its subgroups (such as the International Association of Liberal Religious Women), the ties that Unitarian women had with figures and organizations in the United States, the International Union of Catholic Women, the Catholic girls' protection organizations, the International Catholic Association of Organisations for the Protection of Girls (Association catholique internationale des Œuvres de la Protection de la Jeune Fille, ACISJF), and the protestant International Federation for Aid to Young Women.

In summary, very few of these organizations were both supportive of and involved in international networks. The majority of these entities were religious organizations that operated in a relatively closed manner and primarily engaged in social work, with a particular focus on the protection of mothers and children. A distinctive initiative undertaken in this regard was the establishment of a program aimed at protecting female youth, a program that was meticulously spearheaded by the International Federation for Aid to Young Women (Union Internationale des Amies de la Jeune Fille, AJF), through its Romanian association, known as Asociația Amicele Tinerelor Fete (Association of Friends of Young Girls).

The following discussion provides a concise overview of the involvement of Hungarian women in two distinct station assistance programs. First, the discussion addresses the participation of Hungarian women in the nationwide Romanian station assistance program, which was initiated around 1932 by the AJF and its Romanian counterpart, Amicele Tinerelor Fete. Second, it examines the Hungarian women's initiative in establishing railway assistance social work under the auspices of the Church, with a particular focus on the contributions of Catholic nuns and the Society of the Sisters of Social Service, particularly their Bucharest center founded in 1930.

The Romanian Nationwide Station Assistance Program

The protection of girls who felled themselves pressured or compelled to move in search of labor was a priority in social policies across Europe, with numerous programs developed to combat trafficking in children and girls and to prevent prostitution. Romania was a signatory to the relevant protocols of the League of Nations. Notably, the 1921 International Convention for the Suppression

of the Traffic in Women and Children, specifically Article 7,⁷⁰ mandated that signatory nations undertake measures to oversee harbors and train stations, educate women about the risks they faced, and provide them with lodging and support. Representatives of the Romanian government launched the Asociația Amicale Tinerelor Fete (AATF) association, the Romanian branch of the AJF. The AATF also enjoyed the support of the Orthodox Church and the patronage of Queen Mary. Volunteers met with women seeking employment at train stations in Bucharest and other cities, such as Brașov, Constanța, and Galați. The representatives disseminated information, offered accommodations, and provided assistance and care to those in need.

In 1932–1934, there was active collaboration among women who belonged to the three major ethnic groups in the Transylvanian city of Brașov (a multiethnic city located on the border between Transylvania and the Old Kingdom of Romanian, or the so-called Regat). The president of the German-Saxon Women's Association, Amalie Musotter, emphasized at the meeting of representatives in 1931 that the participation of Saxon women in the founding of the Brașov branch of the Amicale Tinerelor Fete was important for their ethnic community.⁷¹

In 1932, the Bucharest and Brașov station assistance efforts were undertaken in Romania with the help of funds from the association's headquarters in Neuchatel but also with state support.⁷² It is important to note that there were no ethnically Hungarian or Saxon women among the association's leadership and its supporters.⁷³

The organization's Brașov-based center stood out as a unique platform, fostering collaboration among women from diverse ethnic and confessional backgrounds.⁷⁴ In Brașov, in 1932, a total of 633 individuals were consulted "with no regard to nationality," yet only 58 of these individuals were admitted to the home established to provide temporary accommodation for women travelers. In Bucharest, according to their 1932 report, at the Northern Railway Station

70 International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, concluded in Geneva on September 30, 1921, as amended by the Protocol signed at Lake Success, New York, on November 12, 1947. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1921/09/19210930%2005-59%20AM/Ch_VII_3p.pdf

71 See Schiel, *Frei – politisch – sozial*.

72 See Asociația Amicale Tinerelor Fete, *Dare de seamă pe anul 1932*. ANR SANIC, Cantacuzino family documents, dossier 90, 49.

73 Ibid., 49.

74 Brassói Lapok, "Akció a leányok védelmére."

the organization provided aid for 1,320 women, with a negligible percentage of those beneficiaries being of Hungarian origin (44 in total). It was a small number considering the hundreds of Hungarian girls for whom some form of aid was provided in the same period by the Catholic Social Sisters,⁷⁵ as discussed in greater detail below. The figures below, which are revealing, indicate the number of Hungarian women for whom the Catholic Social Sisters provided accommodations in the given year: 1931: 188; 1932: 220; 1933: 582; 1934: 597; 1935: 682; 1936: 760; 1937: 780; 1938: 810; 1939: 870; and 1939: 930.

Despite its alleged commitment to multiculturalism, the organization's operational practices reveal that it was under pressure to deal with women as members of distinct national or ethnic communities. The AJF did not make possible the creation of a supportive ethnic space in the interwar period. Catholic Hungarian women and Saxon women thus found themselves compelled to launch their own, independent railway mission-type activities.⁷⁶

The “Railway Mission” of the Hungarian-Speaking Denominations of Romania

The Hungarian railway mission project, known as the “pályaudvari misszió” (train station mission), was initially spearheaded by religious women's associations in Hungary at the beginning of the twentieth century. Following the war, various organizations engaged in similar social initiatives in Hungary. The most prominent of these organizations was the Magyar Egyesület a Leánykeresekedelem Ellen, or the Hungarian Association against Trafficking in Girls (MELE),⁷⁷ founded in 1909 in Budapest, which sought to prevent prostitution and assist women and girls who were seeking to secure livelihoods on the urban labor market. MELE was also part of the huge national organization Pályaudvari Missziókat Fenntartó Egyesületek Országos Szövetsége, (National Association of Railway Station Missionary Associations), founded in 1913. The aim of this Association

75 A bukaresti ház krónikája. 39. A Szociális Testvérek Társaságának Levéltára, Kolozsvár.

76 Something similar happened in Poland, where Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish women worked in separate railway mission projects. See Nithammer, “Closing the Abyss of Moral Misery.” The Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish denominations separately sent out station missionaries throughout Europe. See Bieri and Gerodetti, “Falling Women”; Nithammer, “Closing the Abyss of Moral Misery.”

77 MELE was predominantly funded by public money (alongside smaller private donations) and cooperated with state institutions, such as the Ministries of Justice, Health, and Transportation, as well as religious women's organizations, such as the National Association of Catholic Housewives and the National Association of Hungarian Protestant Women. See Bokor, “Nők a nemzetben, nemzet a nőkben.”

was to provide support (both moral and financial) for women from cities and villages outside of Budapest who came to the capital or planned to travel abroad by establishing shelters and homes for them (until their departure, in the case of those who sought to leave the country). However, the social programs administered by MELE, in contrast to those of the Transylvanian women's organizations, were primarily financed by public funds and were closely aligned with state institutions.

The Transylvanian Catholic women's elite convened during the Congress of the Catholic Women's Association, which was held from July 29 to August 1, 1928, and reestablished a committee tasked with resolving the situation of Székely girls who moved to the Old Kingdom of Romania. This committee was entrusted with the mission of assessing the living conditions of the Székely girls in major Romanian cities. During the conference of the RMKNKT on November 10–12, 1928, the organization passed a resolution that outlined several key directives for the Transylvanian confessions. These directives included the initiation of precise data collection in rural areas concerning the circumstances of young girls, the establishment of youth associations for girls, the initiation of educational initiatives regarding the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls, the establishment of accommodation offices and servants' homes in major towns in collaboration with the relevant authorities, the promotion of domestic industry, and the organization of a railway mission in partnership with the authorities.⁷⁸ Therefore, the missionary endeavors of the Hungarian Christian confessions were initiated in the major Romanian cities, but primarily in the Old Kingdom of Romania, where the most of servants traveled to work.

Transylvanian Hungarians had begun to emigrate to the Regat for economic reasons in the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ The migration of Hungarian girls from Transylvania and particularly from Székely Land to the Regat has been a prominent topic in contemporary discourse⁸⁰ The Romanian middle class preferred to employ Székely women as maids, housekeepers, servants, and

78 Horváth, "Küzdelem a leánykereskedelem ellen"; "Határozat a leánykereskedelem elleni küzdelem tárgyában."

79 At the time of the 1889 census, there were 11,222 Hungarians living in the Old Kingdom of Romania. According to contemporary publicists, their numbers had been steadily increasing since the 1880s, and by the turn of the century, churches counted 26,000 Hungarian souls. See Árvay, "A bukaresti magyarok lélekszámának alakulása," 143. According to the 1930 census, Bucharest's Hungarian population numbered 24,052 individuals. This demographic, however, was not monolithic. It comprised individuals hailing from diverse regions of Transylvania, with many representing second-generation Hungarians.

80 Gidó, "Az 1902-es tusnádi székely kongresszus."

childcare providers due to their punctuality, discipline, and culinary expertise. The issue became politicized not only due to the danger of trafficking in girls or as an alleged symptom of moral decline and the breakdown of peasant values and values associated with womanhood, but also because it had significant ethnic implications.⁸¹ A prolonged stay in Romanian territory was often associated with a decline of Hungarian “blood,” ethnically or nationally mixed marriages, the loss of one’s mother tongue, assimilation, and permanent migration. These women were also frequently viewed as being at the mercy of a foreign world due to their ethnicity and otherness and therefore often more vulnerable to predation and violence. Although some women activists wrote or spoke about thousands of Székely girls who faced this fate,⁸² it is difficult to determine the actual numbers. According to the official statistics, by 1930, 1.04 percent of the women from Ciuc County (Csík) and 1.24 percent from the region known as Trei Scaune (Háromszék) had moved to Romanian cities (both Ciuc County and Trei Scaune were and to some extent still are home for the most part to Hungarian-speakers). The number of women from other Székely cities, such as Gheorgheni (Gyergyó), and administrative units (such as Odorhei, Udvarhelyszék, which was a former Székely seat), who were registered as residing in the Regat was less than 1 percent.⁸³ This data, however, should be approached with a critical eye, as it reveals nothing about seasonal migration patterns, for instance migration in winter months and the migration of the unskilled labor force during the agricultural off-season.

A considerable segment of the Hungarian population residing in Transylvania sought employment opportunities in the major Romanian cities. In response to the social changes caused by migration, the various institutions, each with its own discursive framework, promised or provided different types of protection. In response to the fear of life in a community of strangers, women’s organizations offered two courses of action. First, they recommended staying at home. This involved adhering to domestic patterns, the making of clothing, the promotion of traditional attire (as opposed to garments that had an “urban” nature), and active involvement in local religious rituals. Second, they recommended participation in urban women’s groups for women who did chose to migrate, founded especially for women who were in search for employment opportunities.

81 See also Bözödi, *Székely bánja*.

82 Stettner, “Leányegyesület – lélekmentés – fajvédelem,” 2.

83 *Recensământul general*, 1931.

One of the most promising projects in this minority program in support of girls was the Catholic railway missionary program initiated in 1930, when the Society of the Sisters of Social Service, founder of the Catholic Women's Association, was granted authorization to oversee the situation of Hungarian servants and maids in Bucharest. The Society ran a railway mission project and operated a labor exchange office and a girls' home. In the mid-1930s, the Reformed Church also launched its own servant mission program, which entailed the establishment of various initiatives for female servants who belonged to the Reformed Church and were engaged in work outside their home. The Church also established a home in Bucharest for girls who belonged to it. The Reformed Church incorporated the servant mission within its internal mission. This practice was adopted by the Unitarian Women's League, which operated employment centers and accommodation houses for servants in the 1930s. These organizations had initiated census monitoring and communication with girls working far from home. The social work involving peasant women had to be administered through existing social groups to ensure its efficacy. Consequently, this activity was implemented within confessional groups. These groups constituted living communities that operated according to their own networks and moral values.

In the discussion below I present the Catholic railway mission program as a case study. The initiators of the program, the Society of the Sisters of Social Service,⁸⁴ which was a prominent Catholic community of the RMKNKT, played a significant role in the social activism of Transylvanian Hungarians in the interwar period. They were engaged in various aspects of social life and have been recognized for their significant contributions. The Society, which had its center in Budapest, was led by Margit Slachta, a formidable character who significantly influenced the organization's social profile. The legal union of the Romanian branch with the Hungarian main organization was prohibited by Romanian law. However, this union was in practice maintained in secrecy. As articulated by Sister Augusztá to the leaders of the Hungarian organization in Budapest in 1923, on the occasion of the establishment of the Romanian branch, "We are united with you in spirit, direction, and love."⁸⁵

They considered the training and professionalization of women in various areas important. They maintained hundreds of girls' associations and provided

84 See Farinati, "Szerzetesnők a keresztény feminizmus – a társadalom szolgálatában."

85 See Murányi, "Szellemben, irányzatban, szeretetben egyek vagyunk veletek."

religious training for the female elite. Training courses were also held for mothers, and agrarian courses were held for women living in rural areas. Groups were also formed for servants and women working abroad.

The Social Sisters explained their mission as follows:

The most genuine and pioneering task of the Society is to place in the public arena intellectual workers whose vocation is to represent the Catholic public interest, the interests of the temporary and eternal wellbeing of the family, woman and child, and to defend them with the same modern instruments and in the same centers as those with which the holders of secular power operate, influencing millions of people of the future centuries.⁸⁶

The Social Sisters placed emphasis on the empowerment of women in rural and village society. These initiatives encompassed a wide range of activities, including preventive measures, intervention strategies, problem-solving in settings such as employment offices, and ongoing fundraising efforts. The sisters' organizational power derived from their efforts in community-building. They had an extensive Catholic women's network. They established numerous women's groups in their home villages and in major cities to which some of these women had migrated. These groups were referred to as the Saint Katalin groups, the Márta groups, and the Saint Zita groups. There were also groups, however, that were simply referred to as "girls' groups from," followed by the name of the given town or village. These groups were able to provide accommodations and food for girls in collectives and also to exert a strong influence on their life choices and opportunities. A notable example of this multifaceted endeavor was *Harangszó* (Chime of the Bell),⁸⁷ a monthly newspaper published in Cluj from 1935 to 1943 which was specifically intended for girls and women in villages, and *Ezer székely leány napja* (The Day of One Thousand Székely Girls) in the 1930s, the biggest procession of Catholic Székely girls in the interwar period.⁸⁸ The publication of narratives about and photos of girls in rural communities underscored two salient themes: their sense of providence, particularly the profound sense of connection to their homeland, and their sense of affiliation with a vast Catholic women's collective.

The rural girls' communities and the servants' homes in Timisoara, Braşov, and Bucharest eased the challenges of acclimatization process for young women

86 "A puszták rejtekéből az élet centrumába."

87 Bokor, "A mi kis világunk."

88 See Bokor, "A székely Nagyasszony testőrei."

who had to adapt to the demands and challenges of urban life when they moved to larger towns and cities in pursuit of work. These institutions functioned as temporary shelters for individuals lacking permanent accommodations. These institutions also served as communal gathering spaces, facilitating interactions among individuals on weekends and during community meetings. These institutions also functioned as communal support networks for women during their initial period of adjustment. Meeting and cohabitating with other girls facing similar challenges often led to the formation of distinct women's communities.

According to the memoirs of the aforementioned Sister Augusztá and her coworker, Sister Lília,⁸⁹ the aforementioned ACISJF in Brussels launched the first Romanian railway mission program. In response, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Bucharest asked the Sisters to carry out a railway mission in the capital. It is hypothesized that the international connection was ephemeral, as evidenced by the absence of reports to the ACISJF and the lack of support from the ACISJF. Despite its peripheral involvement in this ambitious undertaking, the international organization evidently facilitated the sisters' engagement by offering professional support and guidance derived from its extensive experience.

Stationed at Bucharest's Northern Railway Station, the Sisters' railway mission entailed the pickup of girls traveling alone, followed by interviews, accompaniment to the girls' home if necessary, and the placement of those in need into positions of employment. The girls' home, with a capacity of 14 beds, was established at Petre Poni Street nr. 3, in proximity to the Northern Railway Station. The St. Joseph's sewing shop, which provided additional income for the girls temporarily residing there, was also located there.

One might well ask what distinguished this program from the Romanian programs run all over the country designed for the protection of girls and women. These servant programs, I would argue, were part of an internal initiative with its own set of objectives and a comprehensive integration of the perspectives and requirements of the ethnic community. They operated within a religious and ethnic context and offered a known set of conditions in the unknown. The resolution of the problem entailed the establishment of trust among the communities and groups formed during the migratory process. This trust was crucial if these girls were to be given a sense of belonging and protection that extended beyond the temporary accommodations and counseling

89 Sister Augusztá and Sister Lília, "A Szociális Testvérek Társasága Erdélyi Kerületének megalakulása." A Szociális Testvérek Társaságának Levéltára, Kolozsvár.

provided. This initiative was part of a comprehensive program to cultivate a sense of connection to their home and their religion. This occurred against the backdrop of the prevailing processes of ethnicization and identity construction at the time. In this period of distrust and the erosion of moral, ethnic, and cultural boundaries, the institution of the sisters served as a source of comfort, reliability, and a sense of community. The sisters' institution was a symbol of domesticity, confidence, and communal belonging. This was the distinguishing factor between the Catholic sisters' and the Amicele's railway mission.

Conclusion

The interwar period marked a profound transformation in the public engagement of Transylvanian Hungarian women. Forced to navigate the intersecting axes of ethnic marginalization, patriarchal norms, and political exclusion, their organizations forged a new model of female activism, a model that was simultaneously shaped by external limitations and internal strategies of resilience. These “minority” women (members of the RMKNKT and its affiliate organizations) employed an ambivalent politics in their pursuit of self-determination. On the one hand, they demonstrated a conscious adoption of feminist principles and the concept of the “new woman,” who was capable of engaging in public sphere activities and asserting her rights and who moved away from her static position and moved into the public sphere, the wider community of women, and the realm of state politics. On the other hand, they exhibited a degree of assimilation into the conservative discourse surrounding the role of women, which placed heightened emphasis on women's service to the family and nation. This politics did not align exclusively with traditional conservative or progressive frameworks. While it was founded on ethnic principles, it did not function through mechanisms of exclusion. Instead, it demonstrated a greater degree of openness to diversity and a propensity for collaboration with other ethnic groups.

This ambivalent politics, in addition to the multiethnic nature of the working space, rendered these women's organizations distinct from their counterparts in Hungary. Despite the evident parallels in their political ideologies, which bear a striking resemblance to those espoused by MANSZ in Hungary, it is crucial to recognize that the influence of MANSZ is undoubtedly evident, yet it is imperative to acknowledge the unique character of the political movements within Transylvania, which played a significant role in the history of women's

organizations.⁹⁰ Importantly, this study challenges the binary classification of women's politics into "left-wing" or "right-wing" categories. The Transylvanian case demonstrates that conservative notions of womanhood, centered on family, motherhood, and faith, could coexist alongside progressive aspirations, such as literacy, voting rights, and public engagement. Hungarian women's activism reflected a dual logic. It drew strength from both traditionalism and modernity, from religious obligation and political strategy. Moreover, Hungarian women's international ambitions were consistently constrained by structural exclusions. Despite symbolic cooperation with CNFR and international religious organizations, they were unable to integrate into global feminist platforms. These exclusions also led minority women to construct community-based networks rather than participating in universalist feminist agendas. Their inability to join large organizations, the impossibility of cooperating with Romanian organizations, and the window-dressing policies which limited them in the pursuit of their plans made them more enclosed in their ethnic groups. The "idea of internationalism,"⁹¹ advocated by the main international organizations, which were based on western models of state building, was not a viable model for Transylvanian women. Cultural and linguistic differences and a general lack of understanding of (or indifference or hostility to) the needs of ethnic and national minority communities hindered collaboration between Romanian and Hungarian women. The international organizations in question did not address the needs of the ethnic minorities. In this initial phase of organization, the CNFR played a pivotal role. It defined the concept of minority women, their working space, opportunities, and limitations. The other actor, the international organizations, by excluding minority women's organizations, narrowed the spectrum within which minority women could assert or voice their own international politics. Conversely, the inclusion of these regional women's organizations in the program by other international entities contributed to the shaping of their profile. The acknowledgement of minority status and the role of minority women as representatives of minority interests empowered these women to assume roles as advocates for their community, with the objective of addressing the challenges that minority communities faced and contributing to cultural mobilization. This process of empowerment also entailed significant

90 See the studies by Andrea Pető, Susan Zimmermann, Judit Szapor, and Judit Acsády listed here.

91 Zimmermann, "The Challenge of Multinational Empire."

political empowerment and assertion of the right to at least some limited spaces in the public sphere (including state and other policy platforms) for women.

This brief presentation of the railway mission programs reveals how national and international gendered discourses were reinterpreted in minority contexts. While Romanian and international initiatives functioned through official channels, they failed to engage meaningfully with the experiences of women who belonged to minority communities. In contrast, the Hungarian Catholic and Protestant railway missions operated through their own networks, combining social protection with identity preservation.

In conclusion, Hungarian women's organizations in interwar Romania were far more than charitable groups. Their legacy compels us to rethink how emancipation is articulated in minority contexts, not merely as a struggle for equality, but as a collective strategy for survival, solidarity, and self-determination.

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