
Gendering Violence in the Age of Anti-Genderism

Feminist Framing of Violence Against Women in Slovakia

ABSTRACT This article examines the collective action frames of violence against women put forth by women's organizations in the gender equality community in Slovakia during the current period of heightened conservative activism against gender and sexual equality. This study finds that women's organizations in Slovakia overwhelmingly deploy a Gender Equality frame with distinctly feminist-oriented content to resist violence against women during the current period of anti-gender activism and accompanying state hostility toward feminist goals. This differs from previous studies that find women's organizations in Central Eastern Europe historically deploy gender-neutral frames, providing evidence to the theory that anti-genderism can contribute to more radical activism as a response. Frames are contextualized through a discussion of the anti-gender movement in the country utilizing the concept of discursive opportunity structure.

KEYWORDS anti-genderism, Central Eastern Europe, feminism, Slovakia, violence against women

INTRODUCTION

Democratic transitions in the 1990s opened up the discursive and political environments for activists in the post-communist feminist movements to advocate for women's rights and promote gender equality policies. However, these transitions also provided an opportunity for anti-feminist actors to make claims in discursive and political spaces.

Today, activists within Slovakia's post-communist feminist movement not only have to contend with negative perceptions of feminism among the public resulting from the country's communist past, but they also have to contend with the anti-gender movement, which explicitly opposes feminist goals. Actors in the anti-gender movement rally around their opposition to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, an international treaty to combat violence against women (VAW) (Council of Europe, 2011). In 2011, when the Convention opened for signatures, there was seemingly nothing controversial about expanding laws to protect women and girls from violence. By 2015, 39 European states had signed the Convention, including Slovakia. Shortly after states signed the Convention, women's activists and LGBT¹ activists throughout Central Eastern Europe began to experience the rise of this conservative countermovement from

1. In this article, I use the acronym LGBT as this is the acronym predominantly used by activists and academics in Slovakia.

religious and political conservatives over the ratification of the Convention. In particular, anti-gender actors oppose the definition of gender in Article 3(c) of the Convention, where “gender” is defined as “the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.”

In Slovakia, the anti-gender movement has transitioned from civil society activism against feminist goals to what Roggeband and Krizsán (2020) refer to as a “hostile state.” Many countries experience conservative countermovements against gender equality and maintain conservative civil society organizations; however, a hostile state is one in which the state actively discredits gender equality as a goal, and actors from right-wing civil society organizations replace gender equality activists in state agencies (p. 19). Some scholars have found that the anti-gender movement has reinvigorated feminist activism in some countries. In Poland, for example, activists have resisted the government’s conservative policies by engaging in feminist protests and utilizing feminist discourses (Szczygielska, 2019) while also creating allies across movements supporting gender equality, women’s rights, Europeanization, democracy, and LGBT rights (see O’Dwyer, 2018).

In Slovakia, the anti-gender movement has created a hostile state toward feminist activism, influencing the discursive opportunity structure in the country. Thus, contemporary Slovakia provides a case study of feminist framing in a context where the anti-gender movement not only is prevalent within civil society but also has moved into government. This study asks: How do Slovak women’s organizations frame their messages regarding violence against women in the context of the current hostile state? And why might such framing differ from previous frames of violence against women deployed by feminists in the region?

Operating within this hostile state, one might expect women’s organizations to deploy gender-neutral frames to continue their work within the restrictive discursive opportunity structure. Instead, I show that Slovak women’s organizations not only have opted for a gendered frame of violence but also have deployed explicit feminist language, providing evidence to the theory that a hostile state toward feminist goals during moments of gendered political crisis can lead to greater feminist activism, or at least more gendered messaging in women’s activism.

This study analyzes organizations in Slovakia’s gender equality community that address violence in their published material and are civic associations registered with the government of Slovakia (see Table 1 for descriptions of organizations included in the study). Thus, this study does not include informal associations organized around VAW, such as feminist reading groups, online blogs, and social media groups. While this activity is essential in community-building and spreading awareness about VAW, this study seeks to examine the frames put forth by organizations that operate full-time and are directly connected to the state. Data collection began with the women’s organizations listed in a 2010 study produced by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung’s Gunda Werner Institute for feminism and gender democracy. Through fieldwork in Slovakia and neighboring Czechia from 2018 to 2019, I expanded my contact with activists, journalists, and policymakers within the gender equality community. This study includes a total of 15 organizations, all known registered civic associations in Slovakia, that meet the criteria

TABLE 1. Descriptions of Organizations

Organization	Founding Year / Original Focus	Primary Location	Activities	Frame
Aliancia žien Slovenska	1993 / Citizens movement to connect women across Slovakia	Bratislava, Slovakia	Produces shadow reports, organizes conferences, advocacy, lobbying	Women-Centered, Individual Rights frame
ASPEKT	1993 / Feminist educational organization	Bratislava, Slovakia	Feminist publishing organization, advocacy	Gender Equality frame
Občan, demokracia a zodpovednosť	2002 / Focused on minority rights	Bratislava, Slovakia	Advocacy, provides legal assistance	Individual Rights frame
EsFem	2000 / Focused on awareness-raising and education	Prešov, Slovakia	Produces lectures, workshops, and lessons on combating VAM and sexual education	Gender Equality frame
Fenestra	1999 / Crisis center	Košice, Slovakia	Provides services to female victims of violence, produces legislation, engages in mediation and training activities in community	Gender Equality frame
KOTVA n.o. Trebišov	2006 / Counseling and rehabilitation services	Trebišov, Slovakia	Provides counseling, activism through education, and rehabilitation	Women-Centered, Individual Rights frame
Možnosť vol'by	2001 / Coalition of women's NGOs supporting reproductive rights in Slovakia	Bratislava, Slovakia	Monitoring and advocacy of women's rights legislation, consults on policies related to gender equality, advocacy, networking of feminist and women's NGOs	Gender Equality frame
MyMamy	2000 (published its list of services) / Counseling center	Prešov, Slovakia	Provides counseling, operates safe houses, offers legal and psychological counseling, advocacy	Gender Equality frame

(continued)

TABLE 1. (continued)

Organization	Founding Year / Original Focus	Primary Location	Activities	Frame
Hana	2013 / Helpline for women experiencing violence	Spišská Nová Ves, Slovakia	Operates helpline and counseling center, advocacy	Gender Equality frame
Pomoc Rodine	2000 / Shelter and counseling center for women experiencing violence	Michalovce, Slovakia	Operates intervention centers, provides legal counseling, provides material support	Gender Equality frame
Poradňa pre občianske a ľudské práva	2001 / Focused on forced sterilization of Romani women, expanded to violence in hospitals and other violations of Romani women's rights	Košice, Slovakia	Litigation, advocacy, education	Women-Centered, Individual Rights frame
Progresfem	2012 / Social counseling	Poprad, Slovakia	Counseling for women and children who are victims of violence, provides support groups, provides material help, education, advocacy	Gender Equality frame
Slovak-Czech Women's Fund	2004 / Supports activities of women activists, women's groups, women's organizations and feminist movement	Prague, Czechia	Funds women's rights projects, provides space for women's rights organizations to meet, awards grants, implements gender equality projects	Gender Equality frame
Žena v Tiesni	2005 / Counseling center focused on helping and protecting women who have experienced violence in intimate relationships and their children	Martin, Slovakia	Counseling for women and children who are victims of violence, advocacy and awareness-raising, training for volunteers, publication of reports on VAW	Gender Equality frame
Ženské kruhy	2011 / Focus on systematic violation of women's rights in maternity hospitals	Partizánske, Slovakia	Advocacy, research violations of rights, publish texts, legislate, network with women's NGOs, produce shadow reports to international institutions	Gender Equality frame

mentioned above during the years in which this study was conducted. The organizations included in this study are geographically diverse, operating in Bratislava, Martin, Partizánske, Prešov, and Košice. They are also diverse in the types of violence they address and in their advocacy work. Organizations included provide services to women victims and survivors of violence, engage in awareness-raising campaigns to educate the public about the prevalence of VAW, and provide funding for projects related to women's rights and activism against VAW. Finally, organizations are diverse in their funding sources. They receive funds from the Slovak government, European Union grants, Norway grants, the United States Embassy, the Canadian Embassy, the Women Against Violence Europe network, and the Heinrich Böll Foundation for various projects.

Sources selected for analysis were materials produced for public consumption in 2015 or later. This is intended to capture the content of frames that organizations have put forth to the public since the rise of the anti-gender movement. Textual data includes leaflets, pamphlets, handbooks, educational material distributed to the public by the organizations, organizations' websites, and reports published online. I first conduct a frame analysis to determine the frames put forth by the organizations using textual data. This involves breaking down the frames into smaller components by asking sensitizing questions (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, p. 35). I include four sensitizing questions in the study: What are the organization's goals?, How does the organization describe itself?, How does the organization propose these issues can be solved?, and What, according to the organization, is the cause of VAW? I also incorporate descriptive questions into the methodological framework to provide context about the organizations for comparison (see the Appendix for a list of descriptive questions used in this study). I then employ the technique of code-mapping, a process through which a set of initial codes go through multiple iterations of analyses to arrive at the overarching frames (Saldaña, 2013, p. 194). In addition to the textual data, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with activists in Slovakia and four interviews with representatives of government agencies and international organizations.² These interviews provide context to the frames determined through the textual analysis.

In this article, I refer to activists within the post-communist feminist movement as "women's activists," given that some activists do not personally identify as feminists. I use the term "feminist" to refer to activists and organizations that self-identify with this term. In addition, there is much debate within the feminist literature regarding the terminology of violence. Phrases such as violence against women, violence against women and girls, gender-based violence, and gendered violence are never uncontested, nor should they be. These phrases, while they share much in common, also have nuanced differences in their meanings.³ In this article, I employ the phrase "violence against women" as this is the

2. Interviews were conducted between August 2018 and June 2019 in person in Bratislava, Slovakia; Brno, Czechia; and Prague, Czechia. Interviews were also conducted virtually and by phone. Textual material was gathered in person from 2018 to 2019, and additional textual material was gathered from organizations' websites in early 2022.

3. For example, Cynthia Enloe notes in her 2004 book *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* that feminists have utilized the phrase "violence against women" to highlight the disproportionality by

phrase most commonly used by women’s activists in Slovakia and appears most widely in the organization’s published material.⁴

In the following sections, I present the literature on the relationship between discursive opportunity structure and framing in Central Eastern Europe. I then briefly describe the history of feminist activism in Slovakia regarding VAW and the current anti-gender movement in the country, providing evidence of the hostile state. I then analyze the Gender Equality frame—the most prominent frame deployed in the country. I briefly discuss the less-prominent Individual Rights frame. Finally, I examine the complicated nature of the frames by discussing three organizations and their framing efforts in depth.

DISCURSIVE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAMING

David Snow and Robert Benford (1988) conceptualize collective action framing as a claims-making activity that provides meaning to events, guiding action on a particular issue (p. 464). This framing perspective assumes the agency of social movement actors by focusing on how actors shape movements by defining a problem (diagnostic frame), assigning blame for the problem (prognostic frame), and presenting a solution to the problem (motivational frame) (Benford & Snow, 2000). Framing requires ongoing negotiation between movement leaders, activists, and participants (Benford & Snow, 2000). These negotiations occur within the bounds of a discursive opportunity structure that includes the discursive context social movement actors draw upon to create frames and in which frames are embedded to resonate with a specific group of people (Ferree, 2003). The concept of discursive opportunity structure allows for an understanding of both the political and discursive elements that influence the frames of social movements, but it does not dictate the choice of frame. It, nevertheless, sets the boundaries of discourses that can be drawn on for a message to resonate within a particular context (Snow, 2004; Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). The discursive opportunity structure is constructed based on historical gender relations and ongoing political discussions at the international and domestic levels. In Central Eastern Europe, the communist legacy is one influence on the discursive opportunity structure at the domestic level, affecting framing outcomes. In the 2000s, in Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, Slovenia, and Hungary, NGOs deployed a gender-neutral frame of domestic violence to increase the likelihood that the issue would be taken up in policy deliberations (Fábíán, 2006, p. 136). Katalin Fábíán (2010) concludes that

the tendency toward subsuming domestic violence against adult women within the larger category of violence in the family is typical across postcommunist Europe and

which women experience certain types of violence. In contrast, when the Vatican uses the term “violence against women” in international documents instead of “gender-based violence,” it does so to support essentialized notions of gender in which women are deemed the “weaker sex” who require protection. Uncritically deploying one term or another can lead to the silencing of certain groups that experience this violence or hide the power relations at play in this type of violence.

4. The Slovak language does not have a term that refers to gender as a social construction. Thus, many organizations use the phrase *násilie na ženách* (violence against women).

Eurasia (also, Johnson & Brunell, 2006; Krizsan, Paantjens & van Lamoen, 2005). This reconceptualization makes the feminist concept of domestic violence gender-neutral by erasing the gendered critique of power. (pp. 94–95)

In post-communist Europe, the history of gender-equality rhetoric under communist rule and the demonization of feminism as a bourgeois ideology (Šiklová, 1997; Jusová, 2016) reduced the likelihood that a gender-equality frame would resonate in Central Eastern European countries.

Women's organizations in Central Eastern Europe working to end violence against women have formed communities around promoting gender equality. They are also members of international nongovernmental organizations, such as Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), that take a gendered approach to address violence. Nevertheless, scholars have pointed to the enduring influence of domestic discursive and political environments in influencing the frames that these organizations present to the public. Fábíán (2014) finds that Hungarian women's organizations opted to produce a gender-neutral and child-centered frame to raise awareness of domestic violence in an increasing nationalist political environment (pp. 168–169). She states that in the case of Hungary,

The term “violence against women” was immediately rejected by the public and most politicians for focusing on adult women. As the naming and consequent policy debate progressed, it stripped domestic violence of any feminist connotations, calling it “violence in the family” to include—and eventually focus on—children and to a lesser degree, the elderly. (Fábíán, 2014, p. 159)

Thus, even when an organization might be based on feminist principles of promoting gender equality, activists may still produce a gender-neutral frame in order for the message to resonate in the domestic context and promote policy change.

An organization's particular feminist approach can also influence how gender equality issues are framed. In Slovakia, some women's organizations have combined their gender equality activism with their activism to combat racial discrimination through an intersectional approach, focusing on reproductive violence and reproductive freedom relating specifically to Romani women.⁵ Women's activists in Central Eastern Europe have also worked to expand the feminist frames of violence based on their own experiences. Janet Elise Johnson and Gulnara Zaynullina's (2010) case study of Russia and Sonja Robnik's (2010) case study of Slovenia find that NGOs' framing of domestic violence throughout the 2000s included a frame of economic violence which extended the framework of domestic violence from physical violence to the controlling of one through financial means. They also argue that this frame, which highlights the structural economic causes of violence, draws attention to the state's role in failing to provide social services, resonating in post-communist contexts. Other frames that were found to be prominent within the region include the family-protection frame, in which violence within the

5. Poradňa pre občianske a ľudské práva (Center for Civil and Human Rights) and Citizens, Democracy, and Accountability focus their activism on the forced sterilization of Romani women, violence against Romani women in hospitals, and other violations of Romani women's rights.

home is characterized as a threat to the family, and the neoliberal frame, which sees VAW in terms of public health costs to the state (Krizsán & Popa, 2008; Montoya, 2013).

Furthermore, while much has been written on the avoidance of the term “feminism” (Šiklová, 1997; Jusová, 2016) by women’s activists in post-communist Central Eastern Europe, there is evidence that, at times, using the language of feminism is a strategic choice. Barbara Einhorn found that in Hungary in the 1990s, the name “Feminist Network” was chosen for the first post-communist feminist organization because the term “feminist” was one of the few terms that had not been used by the communist regime and was therefore untainted by association with state-socialism’s approach to women’s emancipation (Einhorn, 1991). This demonstrates how activists work within and around the discursive opportunity structure present in a specific context.

Scholars studying the framing of domestic violence in Central Eastern Europe have identified two overarching frameworks: the gender equality framework, which tends to be deployed by women’s NGOs at the international level, and the gender-neutral framework, more often deployed at the domestic level (Krizsán, Paantjens & van Lamoen, 2005; Krizsán & Popa, 2014). Andrea Krizsán and Raluca Maria Popa find in their 2014 study of policy frames of domestic violence in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania that frames fall along a continuum with a structural Gender Equality frame at one end and an Individual Rights frame at the other (p. 762). The Gender Equality frame casts domestic violence as a structural issue rooted in gender inequality, and the Individual Rights frame casts domestic violence as an act of violence in which a stronger individual victimizes a weaker individual, violating the rights of the weaker individual. On this continuum, they locate a variant of the Individual Rights frame, which they term the Women-Centered frame. This frame focuses on domestic violence as the violation of the rights of an individual rather than a consequence of gender inequality. Nonetheless, it highlights women as the majority of domestic violence victims. Krizsán and Popa (2014) find that while the structural Gender Equality frame was used as a starting point for feminist NGOs across the five countries to advocate for domestic violence legislation, the structural Gender Equality frame has not become dominant in any of the five countries. Poland was the only country out of the five in which women’s activists explicitly challenged the absence of a gender equality perspective in domestic violence law (p. 775). In this article, I utilize Krizsán and Popa’s (2014) continuum of frames to situate the frames found in the Slovak context, which range from a Gender Equality frame to an Individual Rights frame, including an Individual Rights frame with a Women-Centered component.

FEMINIST FRAMING IN THE PERIOD OF ANTI-GENDERISM

The discursive opportunity structure sets the boundaries for a frame to resonate with the general public. Still, frames can take the form of operating within the current political boundaries or resisting them. Conor O’Dwyer (2018) traces the LGBT movement in

Poland and finds that the hard-right backlash against LGBT rights facilitated the growth of the Polish LGBT movement, allowing activists to create broadly resonant frames that reference rights and, in particular the violation of rights secured by EU membership. Using the rights framework increased the movement's credibility and allowed the movement to gain allies from other rights-based movements (p. 900). Not all hostile environments, however, create the conditions necessary for a movement to resist the hostile state through their framing efforts; overt repression can increase participation costs. Thus, too much repression has a negative effect on activism. This can be said of Hungary today, where increased repression in the form of targeting women's NGOs and activists (Juhász, 2015) has pushed the Hungarian women's movement into a period of abeyance (see Taylor, 1989). Furthermore, feminist organizations in some countries, such as Croatia, have diversified, drawing attention to a wide range of issues (Sutlović 2019). Nonetheless, Leda Sutlović (2019) finds that Croatian feminists current goal remains "to preserve existing gains and rights while also emphasizing the deteriorated relationship with state institutions" (pp. 58–59).

Thus, the discursive opportunity structure does not impose the choice of frame on social movement actors but rather creates the conditions under which a frame will resonate. This is especially true when movements face what Shriver, Adams, and Cable (2013) refer to as discursive obstruction, "an oppositional campaign waged by networks of elite state and private actors who use their power to sway public opinion against movements that challenge elite interests" (p. 877). They continue, "importantly, these discursive obstruction campaigns occur within relevant discursive opportunity structures, and thus are bound by the cultural and political landscape" (p. 877). In Slovakia, anti-gender actors engage in discursive obstruction by casting gender equality as a foreign import and destructive to the "traditional" family while also creating a moment of gendered political crisis (Johnson & Brunell, 2006, p. 586).

Gendered political crises include periods when oppositional structures to feminist goals that typically remain covert become clearly articulated as a threat to gender equality, resulting in increased mobilization, such as when people's rights are overtly threatened. An example of this occurred in Poland in 2016 and again in 2020 when the ruling right-wing party attempted to ban abortion. Polish women's activists framed access to abortion as a gendered rights-based issue and thus were able to mobilize thousands of Poles through the Women's Strike protests in 2016 and 2020 (Beaty, 2017; Szczygielska, 2019; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Thus, the gendered framing of feminist issues can be used not only to resist the discursive obstruction attempted by conservatives within the hostile state but also to highlight a moment of gendered political crisis to increase participation and mobilization around gender equality and women's rights when these are being significantly curtailed. In what follows, I examine the collective actions frames put forth by organizations resisting VAW in Slovakia. I then rely on the concept of discursive opportunity structure to interpret those frames.

FEMINIST MOBILIZATION AGAINST VAW AND THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT IN SLOVAKIA

Feminist Organizing in Slovakia

Throughout the communist era, VAW was not officially addressed across the former Eastern Bloc (Fábián, 2010). In Slovakia, domestic violence went unaddressed by the Slovak Women's Union, which had previously been under the tight control of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Wolchick, 1996; Bútorová, 2009). Following the transitions from a communist to a democratic regime in the early 1990s, women's activists began to draw attention to VAW.

In 2001, sociologist Magdalena Vanya conducted the first survey to document the perceptions and attitudes of Slovak women on domestic violence, *domáce násilie* in Slovak. Vanya found that many women surveyed justified domestic violence under certain circumstances. Most of the women believed that violence is a private matter to be handled within the home, and 56% of the women sampled knew someone who had experienced violence within the home (Vanya, 2001). In response to this and other international data that brought the prevalence of VAW to light, women's organizations around Slovakia joined together to create The Fifth Woman Initiative, to draw attention to the issue.

Beginning in 2001, as part of The Fifth Woman Initiative, women's activists in Slovakia began organizing awareness-raising campaigns corresponding to the United Nation's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, from 25 November to 10 December. Developing out of the United Nations conferences on women's rights in the 1990s, these yearly awareness-raising campaigns are organized by feminist and women's rights advocates around the world to bring attention to the violence that women face and call for the recognition and protection of women's rights (Antrobus, 2004). In Slovakia, activists organizing these campaigns came from ASPEKT, Progres-fem, Fenestra, Pomoc Rodine, MyMamy, and Možnosť voľby. Activists organized lectures, met with politicians, and staged nationwide campaigns to bring awareness to the statistic that one in five women around the world will face some form of physical and/or sexual violence throughout their lifetime. Slovak activists have cited The Fifth Woman Initiative as one of their most successful campaigns to date, and those within the gender equality community claim that this campaign was so effective that even today when Slovaks are asked about violence against women, they respond that "every fifth woman" is affected.⁶ This campaign resonated within Slovak society, and the first shelters for victims and survivors of domestic violence were opened in Slovakia in 2002.

Throughout the 2000s, women's organizations in Slovakia joined several European and international networks such as Astra, Karat, WAVE, East-West Women's Network, and the regional program of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. In the 1990s and early 2000s, organizations in Slovakia resisting VAW relied on these international contacts. Bútorová (2009) argues that this cooperation between international networks, European

6. Journalist for *Denník N* (2019). Interview by author [Bratislava, Slovakia], 23 January.

organizations, and Slovak women's organizations gave the nascent Slovak women's organizations access to the know-how of partner organizations from countries with a long experience in pursuing a gender equality agenda.

At the time research for this article started in 2018, organizations that address domestic violence in Slovakia included in this study are MyMamy, Aliancia žien Slovenska (Alliance of Women in Slovakia), Žena v Tiesni, KOTVA n.o. Trebišov, Pomoc Rodine (Help for the Family), Progresfem, Hana, and Fenestra. The last five of these are part of the Women's Safety Network (Bezpečná Ženská Sieť Proti Násiliu na Ženach), a network of organizations that address domestic violence and intimate partner violence. In addition, Poradňa pre občianske a ľudské práva (Counseling for Civil and Human Rights), Možnosť voľby (Freedom of Choice), Ženské kruhy (Women's Circles), and Občan, demokracia a zodpovednosť (Citizens, Democracy, and Accountability, CDA) support the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and are concerned with reproductive rights. In particular, they address violence committed by the state against Romani women. In addition, some Slovak organizations address gender equality more generally and engage in publishing and education; these organizations include EsFem and ASPEKT. Finally, the Slovak-Czech Women's Fund is concerned with the economic autonomy of feminist organizations and provides funding to organizations for projects to combat VAW.

The Anti-gender Movement in Slovakia

Anti-gender actors in Slovakia include conservative individuals, organizations, politicians, political parties, and the Catholic Church, with the most influential actors being the Conference of Slovak Bishops and the organization Alliance for the Family (Maďarová, 2015; Valkovičová, 2017; Valkovičová & Maďarová, 2019). These actors have engaged in discursive obstruction of feminist goals by constructing a discourse that connects feminism with Marxism, fascism, and what anti-gender actors term "queer theory" (Maďarová, 2015, p. 40). Through their attacks on the term "gender," they frame feminism and LGBT rights as a foreign import, a form of neocolonialism by liberal elites, and dangerous to the "traditional" family structure (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018).

Veronika Valkovičová and Zuzana Maďarová (2019) document the interconnectedness between the anti-gender movement and mainstream politics in Slovakia. They argue that rather than the anti-gender movement being "anti-system," the movement involves a network of actors that work with state-bureaucratic structures and utilize EU resources. According to Valkovičová and Maďarová (2019), the network of anti-gender actors includes not only those closely connected to the Catholic Church, but also anti-vaccination groups, representatives of organizations that support a constitutional amendment for heterosexual marriage, those that initiated the referendum on "protecting the family," fascist groups, and the leaders of far-right political parties who were elected to parliament in 2016. Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2022) refer to this political alliance between far-right parties and conservative civil society organizations as "opportunistic synergy" (p. 7), in which "gender" acts as the "symbolic glue" that holds the alliance together (Kováts & Põim, 2015). As part of this alliance, anti-gender actors

have become members of political committees, influencing the discourse and policy around gender equality at the national level. In 2011, the Committee on Gender Equality, responsible for implementing anti-discrimination policies and preparing the country's National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women, was reformed to include representatives from anti-gender organizations. Conservative members have worked to oppose resolutions by the committee that are critical of Slovakia's restrictive abortion policy and the use of language in the committee's Strategy for Gender Equality, which supports the recognition of people within the LGBT community (Valkovičová & Maďarová, 2019). Discursive obstruction of this kind shifts the discursive opportunity structure making some discourses more resonant and others seem radical (Ferree, 2003, p. 306). Valkovičová and Maďarová (2019) conclude,

The mainstreaming of the gender ideology rhetoric and the normalisation of this discourse happened simultaneously at different levels of politics and society. Not only has the gender ideology discourse been reinforced by the anti-EU, antiestablishment, nationalist and far right actors, it paved their way into the Parliament and mainstream politics in general. As for the actors coming from the civil society, being involved in the state-bureaucratic structures for years and supported by the state and EU funds, these gender ideology actors have become a stable part of the very same (neo)liberal order they have been critical of for years. It has been gradually leading to systematic backsliding of gender equality policies and raises questions about the character of democracy and the place of gender equality in its imagining and practicing. (para.11)

Notably, in Slovakia, the anti-gender movement works to discursively connect topics of gender and sexuality in public debate. A longtime women's activist in Slovakia describes the breadth of the anti-gender movement as such,

It started with this Istanbul Convention, but the anti-gender movement is much broader because they are now against everything what is related to gender, for example women's rights and gender equality as such and of course against transgender people and LGBT people so you know it is very, according to me, it is a very [well] organized anti-gender movement somehow to resist and to stop the changes that have been planned since 2011.⁷

Examples of anti-gender activism include a "National March for Life" organized in 2015 in Košice by the Conference of Slovak Bishops. This march was intended to counter the pride parades that had taken place in Bratislava, support "traditional" family values over "genderism," "homosexualization," and advocate for restrictions to Slovakia's abortion law. The National March for Life attracted thousands of people and provided conservative organizations with the support needed to further their anti-gender campaign. At the same time, the Alliance for the Family began its activism by singling out a puppet theater in Banská Bystrica and the feminist organization ASPEKT for "homosexualising society" (Maďarová, 2015, p. 39).

7. Gender equality activist and researcher from the European Institute for Gender Equality (2019). Interview by author [Bratislava, Slovakia], 5 February.

Anti-gender actors have engaged in discursive obstruction through their claims that ratification of the Istanbul Convention would disrupt the “traditional” (heteronormative) family structure and require changing the constitution to allow equal rights to LGBT couples (Mad’arová, 2015; Terenzani & Minarechová, 2018). As part of this discursive obstruction, Catholic priest Marian Kuffa and the Slovak Convention for Family organized the “Let’s Stop the Evil from Istanbul” protests. Participants demand that the government not just reject ratification of the Istanbul Convention but withdraw its signature from the document, which, they argue, uses the issue of VAW to spread “gender ideology.” A joint statement issued by Christian Churches in Slovakia in February 2018 stated:

The Istanbul Convention sees the root of domestic violence as the “stereotypical roles” of men and women, and demands that specific, biological features of men and women should be given up in favor of gender equality as a solution to this problem. (Terenzani & Minarechová, 2018)

In February 2018, Prime Minister Robert Fico and his government decided not to ratify the Istanbul Convention (Farkasova 2018). As representative for the organization Aliancia žien Slovenska, Katja Farkasova (2018) stated in an article, “the opposition against gender became a symbol of resistance against the liberal values of modern Europe” (p. 14). In March 2019, the Slovak parliament requested that the government halt the ratification process of the Istanbul Convention again, and representatives of the Church in Slovakia issued a proclamation warning of the “unimaginable” danger represented by the spread of “gender ideology” (*Slovak Spectator* Staff, 2020). Thus, anti-gender actors do not deny the existence of VAW; rather, they have engaged in discursive obstruction of feminist discourses regarding the topic of VAW, specifically in attempting to undermine messages regarding the patriarchal causes of VAW.

Moreover, in 2021 the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family ceased granting financial support to organizations working in the field of gender equality, financial support which the ministry had provided since 2013 to organizations working on issues of gender equality. In 2021, of the 15 organizations applying for financial support, only three were provided with funding: Forum for Life, Counseling Centre Alexis (mainly providing support to families), and the Union of Mother Centers, which unites family and mother centers in Slovakia, two of which openly oppose gender equality.⁸ Following outrage by women’s organizations at the lack of transparency in the funding procedure, the law was changed and in upcoming years state subsidies will not be provided to organizations supporting gender equality. Instead, the ministry will support equal employment opportunities and provide family support (Kadlečíková & Pišová, 2021). Thus, the Slovak government’s refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention, measures put forth to restrict reproductive freedom, and the sidelining of women’s organizations by the

8. Information published on the Facebook page of NGO Možnosť vol’by on 14 January 2021; available from <https://www.facebook.com/MoznostVolby/posts/4081061495241768>.

state created a moment of gendered political crisis in Slovakia, in which gender equality activism is threatened by a state hostile to feminist goals.

THE GENDER EQUALITY FRAME IN SLOVAKIA

Within this current moment of gendered political crisis, the most prominent frame deployed by feminist and women's organizations in Slovakia to combat VAW is the Gender Equality frame, 11 of the 15 organizations included in this study deploy this frame. Within this framework, organizations frame violence against women as a product of patriarchy and gender inequality in which men use violence to exercise power over women. Therefore, this frame has a specific focus on women as victims of violence, and many organizations that deploy this frame provide services only to those who identify as women and their children, adopting a "women-helping-women" operational stance. This gendered framing of violence can be contrasted with previously identified gender-neutral frames of violence deployed by women's organizations in Central Eastern Europe such as the Individual Rights frame, which focuses on acts of violence as a violation of the rights of victims rather than a product of gender inequality (Krizsán & Popa, 2014) and the family-protection frame in which the main objective is to preserve the family unit (Krizsán & Popa, 2008).

The Gender Equality frame has three components, the first of which is a statement of the problem. Within this framework, the problem is characterized as violence against women perpetrated by men. In this same vein, the cause of violence is presented to be inequality between men and women in society. Inequality is presented as an "imbalance of power between men and women in society," as is stated on the organization Fenestra's website. Inequality is also articulated within the Gender Equality frame in terms of social norms. Organizations point to societal stereotypes of men and women and their roles and expectations within the home, this serves as the diagnostic component of the frame (see Table 2). An example of this includes the statements by the organizations Možnosť vol'by and EsFem that "gender stereotypes" cause inequality and violence against women. While these organizations focus on various aspects of inequality, they deploy the same diagnostic frame—inequality in a society leads to violence against women.

In line with the Gender Equality frame, the prognostic component of the frame, which provides a solution to the problem, is said to be social reforms and "systemic changes in society's views" (Fenestra "O nás," 2022), and the organizations' goals include promoting and achieving "gender equality" and "women's equality." Many organizations use the language of "change society's views" about men and women and social reforms, while their goals include promoting and achieving "gender equality" and "women's equality." While organizations that deploy a Gender Equality frame focus on various aspects of inequality, they espouse the same diagnostic component—inequality between women and men in society and gender stereotypes lead to violence against women.

9. These terms are used by the organizations ASPEKT, MyMamy, and Hana.

TABLE 2. Components of Frames

	Gender Equality Frame	Individual Rights Frame
No. of Organizations	11/15	4/15
Diagnostic Frame	Violence against women perpetrated by men, inequality between men and women	Violence within private sphere, lack of respect for the rights of individuals
Prognostic Frame	Social reforms, change society's views of men and women, protection and enforcement of women's rights	Enforcement of human rights, monitoring by government agencies and NGOs, prosecution of those that violate human rights
Motivational Frame	Support gender equality and promote and protect women's rights	Strengthen civil society, promote civic awareness
Victim?	Women	Women (within the Women-Centered approach), children, sometimes men
Perpetrator?	Men	Violent individuals, men, the state

Finally, the call to action includes a call for the protection and enforcement of women's rights. This is exemplified in the 16 Days of Activism against Violence Against Women campaigns organized by women's organizations that deploy this frame. In 2019, Fenestra distributed pamphlets as part of their awareness-raising campaign during the 16 Days of Activism that read "Women have the right to leave or stay," overlaid on women's silhouettes. Drawing attention to the violations of women's rights and promoting the protection of women's rights serves as the motivation component of the Gender Equality frame. The various elements of this frame are displayed in Table 2. Breaking down the various components of this frame highlights the gender dimensions of violence taken into account and emphasized in the Gender Equality frame.

Framing and Feminist Identity

Of the 15 organizations analyzed, 4 openly used the terms "feminist" and "feminism," and 11 use a version of the phrase "women's rights," including "protection of women's rights" and "enforcement of the rights of women" in their published material. Možnosť vol'by claims that they are organized based on *feministické princípy* (feminist principles) and ASPEKT uses the term "feminism" in a number of its publications. The organization Žena v Tiesni, which started in 2005 as a counseling center in central Slovakia, states on its website that its activities are "based on human rights and feminist principles." It adds, "we always stand on the side of women and their children, we believe in them and we never cooperate with abusers" (Žena v Tiesni "Kto sme?," 2022). The organization's current project focuses on educating students in primary and secondary schools about domestic and gender-based violence from a gender equality perspective. Furthermore,

playing off the nationalist discourse used by anti-gender actors, in 2022, the Slovak-Czech Women's Fund added a banner to one of its webpages that reads "Make Feminism a Threat Again," invoking the language of feminism in its online messaging.

In Slovakia, feminist organizations join together in support of one another. The Slovak-Czech Women's Fund is one organization that facilitates this. It was established in 2004 to provide financial support to feminist organizations and projects in Slovakia and Czechia. This organization, based in Bratislava, openly claims to be a "feminist organization" on its website and in its published material. This organization brings together many Slovak and Czech organizations on joint projects and provides an alternative funding source for feminist projects. When I asked the director of the Slovak-Czech Women's Fund if they require the organizations they fund to be feminist, she responded, "We don't officially require the organizations that we fund to be feminist organizations, but they know that the Slovak-Czech Women's Fund is a feminist organization when they apply." She continued, "They [the organizations] use language to distinguish themselves; for example, an organization that calls itself a "women's rights organization" is known as being feminist, and this differentiates them from women's organizations."¹⁰ Moreover, organizations gain credibility as they do long-term work with women, and they get the reputation of being feminist organizations.¹¹ In addition to using feminist language and engaging in feminist projects, Slovak organizations are required to sign a "feminist contract" before receiving money from the Slovak-Czech Women's Fund. An addition, resistance to the anti-gender movement has brought together a community of activists that extends beyond organizations combating VAW to journalists and social service providers. These individuals are known within the community of feminists and often coordinate activities, attend women's rights protests together, and publish papers on women's and gender issues.¹²

Complicated Frames

Not all women's and feminist organizations deploy a Gender Equality frame within the Slovak context; three organizations included in the study deploy an Individual Rights frame, in which the solution to the problem of violence against women is said to be the enforcement of human rights by closer monitoring by government agencies and NGOs and prosecution for those that violate human rights. This also includes educating people about their rights, empowering ethnic minorities and women to demand that their human rights are respected, and enacting legal reforms that enforce human rights measures. Furthermore, the motivational frame for these organizations is a call to action to strengthen civil society, promote "civic awareness" (*Aliancia žien Slovenska*), and democratic values (*CDA*).

10. Director of the Slovak-Czech Women's Fund (2018). Interview by author [Brno, Czechia], 12 November.

11. Director of the Slovak-Czech Women's Fund (2018). Interview by author [Brno, Czechia], 12 November.

12. This was articulated by a number of interviewees including a journalist for *Denník N* (2019). Interview by author [Bratislava, Slovakia], 23 January, a researcher and activist having worked for ASPEKT (2018). Interview by author [Prague, Czechia], 8 October, and a scholar and activist (2019). Interview by author [Bratislava, Slovakia], 18 January.

Some organizations take an intersectional approach in the way in which they deploy this frame, drawing attention to human rights violations based on individuals' ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. This is primality utilized by Poradňa and CDA. These organizations draw attention to the violence Romani women face in maternity wards and their lack of access to reproductive healthcare. In doing so, they construct the state as the perpetrator of violence (shown in Table 2). This intersectional element of the Individual Rights frame distinguishes it from the gender equality in the Slovak context, in which women are regularly depicted as a homogenous group.

While there are many similarities between the frames, some organizations deploy a Women-Centered, Individual Rights frame, articulated by Krizsán and Popa (2014), in which they specifically use the discourse of human rights and invoke the language of international human rights instruments, yet organize around women's rights in particular. Divergence and overlap such as this are common between and within social movements deploying injustice frames, where many of the claims regarding a particular injustice intersect.

An example of this is the frame deployed by the organization Fenestra, which uses both the language of women's rights and human rights. Fenestra started in 1996 in the city of Košice and has since developed into a nationwide organization. The organization initially started as a mother center and in 1999 shifted to a counseling center to help women experiencing violence within the home. The organization has since expanded its activism to educate the public about violence against women through information packets and websites for young people to help them recognize violence in their relationships. The organization describes itself as a "group of women, women who help women," and as a "human rights" and "feminist" organization. The organization's website states, "Many women still are denied basic human rights, such as the right to life, the right to freedom and security, the right not to be subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment and the right not to be discriminated against." Therefore, this organization invokes elements of the Individual Rights frame, while still maintaining its primary focus on women and women's rights.

The Aliancia žien Slovenska also deploys elements of the Women-Centered, Individual Rights frame, which incorporates the language of human rights. This organization was started in 1994, and its stated purpose is to "actively support the development of civic awareness and civic culture in their own community" (Aliancia žien Slovenska "About Us," 2022), while specifically addressing violence against women. Today the organization operates a crisis center and provides counseling and legal services for victims and survivors of domestic violence. Aliancia žien Slovenska describes itself as a "citizen's movement" (Aliancia žien Slovenska "About Us," 2022). Activists in Aliancia žien Slovenska do not use the term "feminist" in their published material, even though they practice the policy of women-helping-women. While this organization's primary focus is on women, the organization's stated goal is to support "fundamental human rights" (Aliancia žien Slovenska "About Us," 2022).

Thus, while an organization may exemplify one frame more prominently, it can also incorporate pieces of other frames. In another example, Možnosť voľby which began as an organization to lobby on behalf of women's reproductive rights, gradually started to include other areas of women's human rights into its activism "such as the elimination of

violence against women, gender policies and gender mainstreaming in education and practice.” It currently works to promote Slovakia’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention (moznostvolby.sk). This organization includes reproductive violence as a form of violence against women and a violation of women’s human rights.

Finally, while many Slovak women’s organization use terms such as “violence against women” and “women-helping-women,” this should not be interpreted as an exclusive focus on people who are assigned female at birth. The TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) framing of VAW was not found to be prevalent among women’s organizations in Slovakia. Members of the TERF movement advocate for the use of the term “male violence against women,” oppose what they refer to as “gender identity,” and advocate for women-only spaces as shelters and counseling centers (Women’s Declaration International (WDI) “Declaration on Women’s Sex-based Rights,” 2022).¹³ The textual analysis provided no evidence that the organizations studied are explicitly trans-exclusionary; no organizations included in this study utilized the phrase “male violence against women.” Additionally, no language indicated that these organizations’ services were not available to trans women or that their advocacy excluded trans women. Though this can be interpreted as organizations ignoring trans rights, there is evidence that some organizations are inclusive of trans rights. In some cases, LGBT organizations are directly supported by feminist organizations. Such is the case with the Slovak-Czech Women’s Fund, which funds TransFúzia, an organization that advocates for the rights of transgender people. Moreover, many activists involved in women’s organizations in Slovakia stated their support for the rights of people in the LGBT community. This furthers their engagement in opposition to the anti-gender movement in the country, which has directly attacked the rights of the LGBT and feminist communities jointly. While this could be viewed as opportunistic alliance-building, it also demonstrates a focus by Slovak women’s organizations on gender rather than sex, a progressive stance in a period of anti-genderism.

CONCLUSION

There are many discourses present within the discursive opportunity structure at any given time, and there are various ways in which social movement actors can draw on these discourses and organize them into coherent frames. Thus, framing requires deliberate action on the part of social movement actors. Activists might attempt to increase resonance and work within the context of the current discursive opportunity structure. Previous studies have found that women’s activists across Central Eastern Europe have attempted exactly this by deploying primarily gender-neutral frames of VAW. This is attributed to a lack of resonance around gendered content resulting from the communist legacy in which feminism was deemed unnecessary and even harmful. However, this article has shown that in the current period in which the anti-gender movement has created

13. The WDI has one representative in Slovakia. This representative did not reply to emails, and the webpage about Slovakia has not been updated since 2020. The webpage is available from <https://www.womensdeclaration.com/en/country-info/slovakia/>.

a hostile state leading to a gendered political crisis in Slovakia, women's organizations do not avoid this historically divisive language; they embrace it. These organizations have overwhelmingly opted to deploy a gendered frame of violence using feminist language in order to resist discursive obstruction by conservative actors and to differentiate feminist activists and organize around a moment of gendered political crisis. To this end, the current moment of gendered political crisis has created an opportunity to bring together new allies, offering a form of resistance against the currently dominant conservative discourses.

Recent years have presented further forms of gendered political crisis in Central Eastern Europe, several of which have signaled potential attitude changes around violence against women in the region. A 2016 survey conducted by the European Commission found that 40% of respondents in Slovakia believed that nonconsensual sex is sometimes justified (Noack, 2016). Compare this with a survey conducted by Amnesty International Slovensko in January 2021 that found that 90% of respondents in Slovakia believe that sex without explicit consent should be considered sexual assault and a crime (Juríková, 2022). Respondents held this opinion across age groups from 18 to 65. Shifting perspectives on violence against women comes after the highly publicized brutal murder of a 34-year-old woman in Bratislava in 2019 and following the COVID-19 pandemic when calls to domestic violence hotlines peaked and organizations engaged in awareness-raising campaigns. Moreover, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Central Eastern European countries, including Slovakia, have distanced themselves from Russia and strengthened their ties to other European Union countries and NATO allies, bucking the trend of right-wing populists across the region in recent years. The war crimes and human rights abuses committed by the invading Russian military, including sexual abuse, could reopen earnest discussions of the importance of human rights treaties such as the Istanbul Convention, which the Ukrainian government ratified in summer 2022. Though these shifts in attitude following gendered political crises have not resulted in policy changes, they can pave the way for a more favorable discursive opportunity structure for feminist activists in Slovakia. ■

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APPENDIX. DESCRIPTIVE CODING QUESTIONS

- When did the organization start?
- In what ways does the organization engage in social activism?
- Where does the organization conduct its work?
- Who are the organization's main constituents?
- Who started the organization? In cooperation with who or what other organizations?
- Who works for the organization?
- What issues does the organization address?
- For what purpose was the organization started?
- What services does the organization provide?
- How does the organization reach its clients and/or the public?
- What type of organization is this?
- Who else/what other organizations does this organization work with?