Chapter 3
Perception and Attitudes Towards Biotechnology in Hungary

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Abstract: Surveys on science and technology indicate that in general, women are less interested in, and less supportive of science and technology than are men. However, differences between women and men highly depend on the specific technology, and amongst the more educated groups gender differences tend to be rather small.

According to recent empirical data, Hungarian attitudes towards biotechnology are not significantly determined by gender. Women as a social group do not identify as supporters or opponents to these technologies, although certain gender-specific concerns are expressed, as for example in the case of consumption of genetically modified (GM) food.

This paper first presents some background information followed by data collected by international and national surveys related to science-society, biotechnology and gender issues. Next, it introduces two examples for biotechnology-related legislation: (i) the special legislation introduced in Hungary concerning production of MON 810 corn, and (ii) the law regulating assisted procreation. The paper concludes that although feminism on the part of civil organisations has not overtly appeared in processes leading to the above laws, women play an important role in expert bodies influencing the regulation of biotechnology.

Keywords: Biotechnology, Hungary, science, assisted procreation, GM food

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3.1 Introduction

With the exceptions of the consumption and production of gene manipulated food production and assisted procreation, questions about technology and the dilemmas they present are rarely discussed in Hungary. Even though gender consciousness appears in the body of experts who legislate, do research, or participate in civil society initiatives, feminist points of view on social issues are represented by very few in public life. Thus, we can assume that these efforts have rather weak impact on how people formulate their views on biotechnology.

Our inquiry looks at how biotechnology is perceived by lay or interest groups and professionals in Hungary. We are interested in the underlying values, ethical and other considerations governing these perceptions and attitudes. On the one hand, the question can be raised of what kind of society and what kind of human values or needs are assumed behind the promotions of these scientific developments. On the other hand, it can be asked in what way people are aware of biotechnology’s impact or how it influences their everyday life. How are these articulated in connection with gender issues? In what way do gender or gender-conscious views influence the formulation and articulation of values and attitudes and how relevant civil organisations raise their voices in these questions?

The problem is subsumed within the broader issue of the public’s understanding of science and their perceptions of humankind’s ability and willingness to interfere with nature.

Earlier studies show that for most people in Hungary, the lack of information makes it difficult to formulate relevant opinions about scientific achievements (Tamás et al. 2000). Yet, in everyday acts of living, men and women are becoming aware of, e.g., the issues of safe food (Vári 2005). Data shows that the weight of civil organisations in Hungary (within which women’s organisations have an even weaker position) is not significant enough in policy and decision making. In spite of this, the civil sector can make certain issues visible and can sometimes initiate debate.

These observations will be supported by analyses based on interviews with representatives of biotechnological research and with representatives of relevant civil organisations (e.g., greens, women’s organisations, consumer protection groups) to illustrate the formulation and gender-based differences of perceptions and attitudes toward biotechnology.

3.2 Methodology

Our statements are based on the mixed methodology of the empirical social sciences. We analysed some databases from external sources: Eurobarometer (Gaskell et al. 2006, Jouhette and Romans 2006) and from internal sources: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology (2006a, b). Besides this we organised interviews with significant participants in research on biotechnology, representatives of NGOs and other experts.