

Article

# Illiberal and Populist Political Narratives on Gender and Underreporting of Sexual Violence: A Case Study of Hungary

Katalin Parti

Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech, USA; [kparti@vt.edu](mailto:kparti@vt.edu)

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## Abstract

Sexual violence is underreported all over the world. In this article, I argue that democratic backsliding undermines the reporting of sexual violence even further. The author's team conducted in-depth interviews ( $n = 15$ ) with representatives of civil society organizations, victims' services, clinical practitioners, and child and family welfare in Hungary in 2017 and 2018, in search of organizational and structural causes to why sexual violence remains vastly underreported in the country with the least reported case numbers in Europe. The small but diverse sample helped identify associations between the reporting of sexual violence and repressive, gender-related political decisions such as threatening the existence of civil organizations undertaking victim support roles and providing victim services, a family-centered political narrative, and confining women's roles solely for reproductive purposes. It is not possible to maintain causation since there are other factors interfering the association. Thus, instead of discussing it as a single cause of underreporting sexual violence, I present the Hungarian case to illustrate the consequences of illiberal politics on reporting. Furthermore, utilizing Slovič's risk-benefit model, I argue that recent products of illiberal politics such as politicizing "gender" undermine trust, a precondition of asking for help and providing support for victims of sexual violence.

## Keywords

civil society organizations; family; gender; Hungary; illiberalism; risk-benefit model; sexual violence; victims

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

Although sexual violence is vastly underreported all over the globe, and individual-level circumstances such as the belief in the just world (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994) and self-blame (Parti et al., 2021) are responsible for staying silent, the author wanted to identify macro-level reasons for sexual violence underreporting specifically in Hungary. To find answers, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of civil society organization (CSO) leaders, experts, advocates, and co-workers in Hungary in 2017/2018. In this article, I will briefly describe the possible underlying organizational and structural issues for sexual violence underreporting, then list the Hungarian illiberal democratic regime's unique characteristics that hinder reaching out for help and reporting sexual violence, illustrated by interview segments.

Although causation between illiberal politics and underreporting sexual violence cannot be proven, the narrative thematic analysis suggests that overarching socio-political drives are responsible for the exceptionally high level of silence that conspire to elevate the perceived risks and lower the anticipated benefits of reporting. Utilizing Slovič's concept of risk-benefit analysis (2010) as a theoretical explanation, the author argues that illiberal political decisions contribute to an extremely low level of sexual violence reporting, adding to the risks victims face when reporting in liberal democracies.

## 2. The Prevalence of Sexual Violence and Why It Stays Unreported

Sexual violence is any sexual act, committed or attempted, which employs violence or coercion without

the freely given consent of the victim, or when the victim is unable to consent (Basile & Saltzman, 2002). It is a severe public health problem and a significant public, societal, and judicial concern (Basile & Smith, 2011). Although the rates vary by country, underreporting sexual violence is a universal pattern around the globe (Spohn et al., 2017; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011) with 63% of sexual assaults remaining unreported to the police (Rennison, 2002). According to the National Crime Victimization Survey in the US, only 310 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults were reported to the police; that means more than two out of three went unreported between 2015 and 2019 (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, 2021). Others estimate that nearly 80% of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported (Morgan & Kena, 2018; Truman & Morgan, 2016). In England and Wales, only around 15% of those who experience sexual violence report to the police (Home Office, 2013). Hungary stands out with only 8% (Virág, 2004) or even a 2.1% reporting rate, the lowest among European countries (Krahé et al., 2014; Lovett & Kelly, 2009). Despite characteristics of reported incidents being similar to those of other countries (Parti et al., 2016), some even gauge that only 0.24% of sexual violence is reported in Hungary (Wirth & Winkler, 2015). Because of differences in conceptualization of sexual violence, and the scarcity of victim surveys, establishing a trend proving the decline in reporting is hardly possible here or anywhere else (Szabó & Virág, 2022). Public databases of reported cases (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021) neither communicate the real numbers of sexual violence nor the number of cases not being reported. Therefore, the only chance to describe the situation is diving under the surface and identifying structural problems responsible for underreporting.

The police are not the only agency to which sexual violence may be reported. As such, CSOs are essential in addressing the issues of sexual violence at the community level, especially when government-funded services are absent or inadequate (World Health Organization, 2007). According to the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), states must act with due diligence to prevent and respond to violence against women. The due diligence standard implies not only lawmaking in the relevant area but also changes in cultural and social patterns and transformation of social institutions that reinforce or appear to justify acts of violence (Qureshi, 2013). In countries where the state did not act according to the due diligence standard (e.g., Gülel, 2021; Sainz-Pardo, 2014), CSOs stepped in to fill the gaps in services, advocacy, education, and victim support, by providing specialized training for service providers, as well as financial empowerment, psychosocial counseling, and safe houses for victims in order to deter further victimization (FRA, 2014).

Over time and across contexts, there are considerable barriers to reporting rape as victims receive very little encouragement to report (Anderson & Doherty, 2008;

McDougal et al., 2018). In the criminal justice process, the victim is expected to provide details of the case in multiple interviews, cumulating the trauma and postponing the healing process. Indeed, reporting to the police and past experiences within the criminal justice system—such as victim blaming (Hayes et al., 2013), rape myth acceptance (Bohner et al., 2009), and institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014)—can put an enormous burden on survivors and thus hinder reporting. In addition to criminal justice related obstacles that this article does not aim to cover, sociopolitical factors can suppress sexual violence into a taboo zone.

### 3. Sociopolitical Factors of Underreporting Based on Previous Research

There are sociopolitical and structural reasons that prevent women in Hungary from speaking up. Discussing these reasons in detail is beyond the scope of this article, but there are a couple of important points worth mentioning here in a nutshell. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) published a comprehensive analysis of cleared rapes in European countries in 2020 (Holmberg & Lewenhagen, 2020). The report indicates that Sweden, England-Wales, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Luxembourg, Austria, Estonia, Ireland, Germany, and the Netherlands have the highest average rate of reported rapes. Surprisingly enough, these are among the most democratic countries worldwide, according to the Democracy Index in 2020. (The Democracy Index is an index created by the Economic Intelligence Unit. Countries were given a score of 0 to 10 for electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties, where 10 was the highest possible score; Statista, 2021). Furthermore, as reported by Brå (Holmberg & Lewenhagen, 2020), there is a high level of correlation between the percentage responding that it is both wrong and against the law to force a partner to have sex (within a marriage or spousal relationship) and the average rate of reported rapes between 2013 and 2017 (correlation coefficient: 0.66,  $R^2 = 0.44$ ; Holmberg & Lewenhagen, 2020, Figure 11). Propensity factors such as gender equality index, confidence in the country's criminal justice system, and index of rejection of rape myths are also highly indicative of the inclination to report, whereby the higher the rejection, the higher the rates of reporting (Holmberg & Lewenhagen, 2020, Table 5).

Viktor Orbán initially became Prime Minister in 1998 for four years, then again in 2010. Since then, Hungary has exemplified backsliding gender-equality policies (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018). To strengthen his populist regime, Orbán put sole responsibility on women as baby-producing machines, thereby inducing the nation's survival (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018). At the same time, women are not acknowledged as human beings on their own rights, only as caretakers in their

families. Consequently, non-traditional genders, feminist activists, liberal thinkers, and CSOs looking to provide services to victims of domestic and sexual violence, became ostracized (Sata, 2021). Following this fashion, the Hungarian government refused to ratify the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, to date the most comprehensive legal instrument on violence against women (cf. Council of Europe Convention, 2011, Art. 1 (b)), arguing that it was a threat to traditional family values and that the protection of women from gender-based violence was already ensured by the provisions of Hungarian national law (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018). The illiberal urge to conserve patriarchal values lead to subdued media discussions about gender. With 80% of the media owned and controlled by the government (Pirro & Stanley, 2021), gender-based violence is referred to as "family conflict" indicating that both parties have been equally involved in the conflict (Horváth, 2022). Even the #MeToo campaign was confined to liberal and cultural circles, its representation quickly fading away in the media; it even promulgated a backlash in the pursuit of gender equality (Zacchia et al., 2019).

Looking at protecting victims of violence, there is undeniable progress. For example, domestic (or relationship) violence became a criminal offense on July 1, 2013, when Act C of 2012 entered into force. It penalizes violent behaviors that harm human dignity and are degrading, resulting in severe deprivation if committed regularly against a relative; however, sexual offenses are not included in the provision. Another highly visible, although hollow, effort of the illiberal state was the creation of government-established walk-in consultation services and helplines for victims, inter alia, of sexual violence. In addition, a total of eight state-established Victim Support Centers came into operation by 2021 (ÁSK, n.d.).

Nevertheless, the government's policy on violence against women faces criticism. According to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (2018), police response to cases and the mechanisms to protect and support victims are inadequate, access to shelters remains insufficient, and the network of institutions and services available for victims are dysfunctional. Victims often do not get adequate information and assistance from state organizations, and thus, they usually try to seek help from the under-budgeted CSOs, operating independently of the government. Furthermore, government-run victims' services do not explicitly aid victims of sexual violence, the same way as sexual violence remains unaddressed as part of relationship violence law (Szabó & Virág, 2022).

The above developments might suggest that the government fulfills due diligence requirements. However, services established by the illiberal state are part of the movement that Grzebalska and Pető (2018) call the "polypore state." According to the concept, illiberal states tend to create ghost institutions mimicking real, functioning services but lacking professional staff, content, mon-

itoring, supervision, transparency, and accountability. In this fashion, the polypore state established top-down civil organizations (GONGOs; Gülel, 2021) with empty agenda, parallel to discrediting organic, bottom-up civil organizations. GONGOs are loyal to the political regime; hence, they receive immense support and funding to reach wider audiences with the politically-backed agenda of protecting the family unit. Meanwhile, since the second term of the Orbán regime started in 2010, not only has public funding been taken away from independent CSOs, but they have also become stigmatized and discredited for critiquing the government in its illiberal tendencies, rendering their operations nearly impossible (Kövér et al., 2021).

#### 4. Theoretical Approach: A Risk-Benefit Model to Explain Sexual-Violence Reporting

To explain the factors that influence the reporting of sexual violence, I utilize Slovič's model of affective decision-making process (Slovič, 2010) as a metaphor here. Slovič's model was developed to illustrate subjective perceptions of risk in general, and, to my knowledge, has never been tested to illustrate victims' decision-making mechanisms. However, I suggest considering the model as one way to understand the perceptions of risk involved in decision-making in precarious events such as sexual violence reporting. Slovič posits that the nature of risk assessment is subjective and value-laden and highlights the importance of the presentation of benefits in an individual's decision-making process. According to the model, the two factors that predict victim behavior are risk regarding the outcome of the decision, and benefit derived from the decision, given the investment of risk. In support of the conception of affect as an orienting mechanism, Alhakami and Slovič (1994) observed that the risks and benefits of various activities and technologies (e.g., nuclear power, commercial aviation) are inversely correlated in people's minds; i.e., the higher the perception of benefits, the lower the anticipation of risk, whereas lower perceived-benefits are associated with higher anticipated risks. Thus, people make biased decisions based on their anticipation of outcomes (benefit) which distort their perception of risks. If the anticipated benefit is perceived to be greater than in reality, the risks will be perceived as lower. If, however, the anticipated benefits are lower, the risks will appear to be higher. I suggest that this two-dimension risk-benefit assessment model can illustrate the (perceived) hazard of reporting sexual violence: (a) the more benefits survivors expect (e.g., survivors' stories are published without bias, without blaming the victim and exonerating the perpetrator in media outlets; survivors' voices are heard instead of suppressing everyday cases and concentrating on the exception; survivors receive support from their families, neighbors, communities, CSOs), and the less risk they associate with reporting (e.g., risk of disbelief, blame, rape myths, and humiliation), the more likely they

will report their victimization; and in turn, (b) the greater the anticipated benefits, the lower the perceived risks of reporting sexual violence. Reporting of sexual assault, therefore, depends on the amount of help offered to the victims and the amount of risk (of discrimination, stigmatization, and revictimization) they run by asking for help. However, political attitudes towards and media representation of sexual assault cases can alter public perception of benefits and decrease the propensity to report (Figure 1).

In the next section I highlight the influence of illiberal gender politics on the willingness to ask for help through a qualitative, interview-based study, conducted with CSO representatives in Hungary. In the follow-up discussion, I explain the possible reasons for underreporting sexual violence, utilizing Slovič's affective decision-making risk-benefit model.

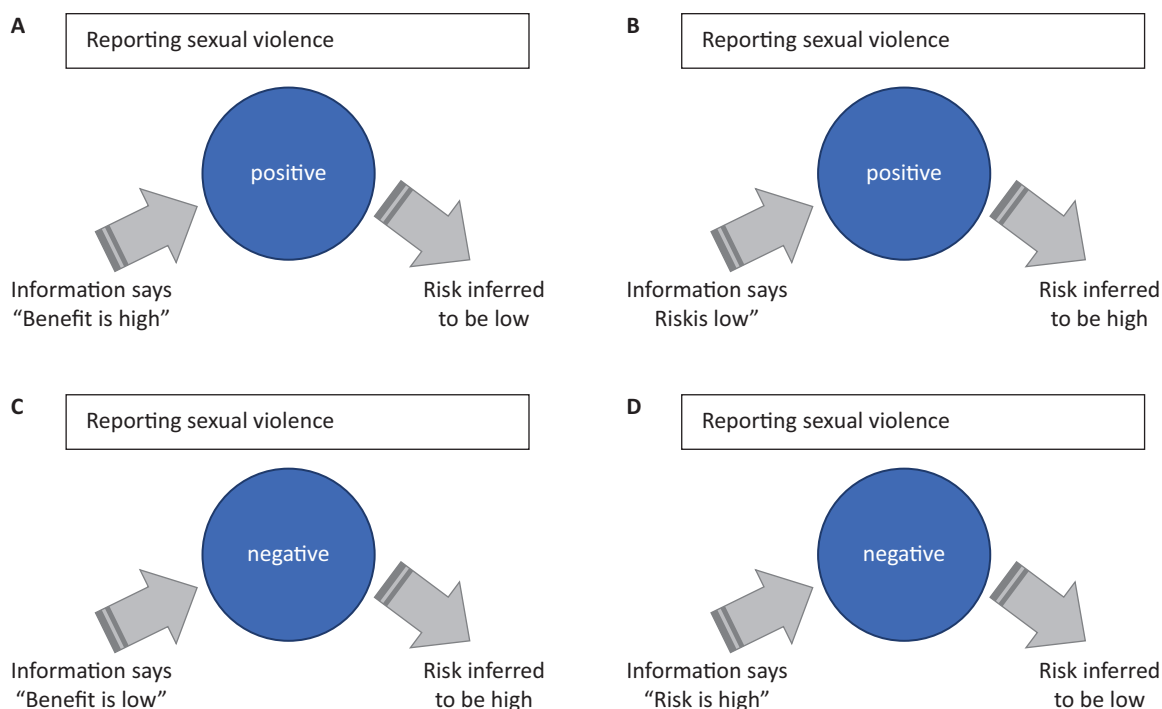
## 5. Methods and Sample

The author was the principal investigator of the research team investigating the causes of underreporting sexual violence in Hungary in 2017 and 2018 (Parti et al., 2021). The current article is published with the authorization of research team members. Although the research team conducted a total of 37 semi-structured interviews with professionals including police forces (Parti & Robinson, 2021), in this article the author only analyzes those interviews ( $n = 15$ ) that were conducted with intimate partner and sexual violence victim support CSOs: psychologists, mental health professionals, women's, victims' and child welfare rights advocates, and representatives of

CSOs serving trans people and sex workers. (At the time of the interviews, no CSO focused solely on victims of sexual violence in Hungary. Lacking such organizations, victims of sexual violence could only turn to women's rights, victims' rights organizations, and child and family services. These CSOs gained knowledge about sexual violence as part of their service, primarily to children and families.)

The rate of reporting sexual violence was historically low in Hungary, even before illiberal tendencies settled in 2010. It was anticipated that service providers and policymakers can shed light on organizational/structural factors of such low rate of reporting and the political infrastructure of reporting. Following the practice of previous research on sexual violence underreporting (Jamel et al., 2016; Koshin & Botan, 2017; Nelson, 2005; Spencer et al., 2018), the author and team consciously sought to interview experts, instead of victims. Slovič (1999) points out that professionals and lay people bring different processes and information to bear in assessing risk. Experts can draw a broader picture, including shedding light on the illiberal structural mechanisms and political infrastructures that influence reporting sexual violence. Thus, while victims could have revealed their own realities, we anticipated that an expert sample would better describe organizational and structural issues.

Participants were recruited from a purposive sample; all prominent CSOs with possible intimate partner and sexual violence victim support agendas registered in Budapest (the capital) were contacted and asked for an in-person interview. Adding a snowball element to the sampling, additional independent experts from all over



**Figure 1.** A risk-benefit model explaining the propensity of reporting sexual violence. Source: adapted from Slovič (2010, p. 741).

the country recommended by the above organizations were interviewed. Interviews ranged from 45 to 105 minutes, with an average of 79 minutes. Participants were asked open-ended questions about (a) their own concept of victimization in general in Hungary, (b) their concept of sexual violence victimization, (c) their concept of victims' needs, and (d) whether these needs are met.

Interviews were audio-recorded with a computer, then transcribed manually. Participants spoke either English ( $n = 13$ ) or Hungarian ( $n = 2$ ). Hungarian-speaking interviews were translated into English after transcription. With a relatively small pool of possible expert respondents, privacy and confidentiality were paramount; hence, interviews were anonymized, and non-identifiable tags were assigned to direct quotations. Thematic narrative analysis was utilized to analyze interview content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After reading the transcripts repeatedly and familiarizing with the content, initial codes were generated before refocusing on the broader level of the themes. After this stage, themes were defined and named.

In seeking narratives as to why sexual violence continues to be underreported in the country, I identified four recurring themes from the interviews: (a) attitudes towards victims of sexual violence, and the level of trust in society; (b) the illiberal political climate; (c) organizational and structural mechanisms in the victim support services; and (d) victims' needs not corresponding with the realities of the formal and informal procedure of justice. Organizational and structural problems at CSOs (Kövér et al., 2021; Szabó & Virág, 2022) and victims' needs not corresponding with formal (criminal) justice services (Parti & Robinson, 2021) were discussed elsewhere, thus, not being analyzed here. Instead, I will concentrate on the first two domains as the most related to the article's theme. It must be noted that the interviews took place before the very recent developments of illiberal politics, such as the banning of gender studies in higher education (Vida, 2019), the curtailment of LGBTQ+ individuals' rights (Vida, 2019), as well as the prohibition of gender themed books in K-12 education (Rankin, 2021b). Nevertheless, the interviews still provide a context deeply embedded in Hungarian illiberal politics.

Interview participants' implicit biases towards illiberal politics cannot be excluded from the analysis. However, it is not the goal of narrative analysis to exclude possible biases. In a thematic analysis (Kim, 2016), the researcher does not interpret the world through the interviews; instead, they accept the validity of the interviewees' interpretation of the world. The interviews can convey feelings that can be interpreted as stereotypical and biased perceptions of reality. However, applying phenomenology, the researcher accepts subjectivity and is nonjudgmental (Kim, 2016). That said, by presenting interview segments, the author neither seeks to represent reality as a whole nor the underlying thoughts of interviewees, but instead, accepts them as subjective but valid realities.

It is important to assert that this research cannot and does not intend to establish direct causation between underreporting and illiberal political decisions. According to Gerring (2005), causation in social sciences is plural, not unitary. Therefore, in social sciences, arguments must be probabilistic causal arguments describing possible causal *mechanisms* and *processes* instead of direct causations. Following this argument, my goal is not to identify the single one determinant of the causes of underreporting sexual violence, but instead to describe the events and conditions that raise the *probability* of victims being less likely to come forward in an illiberal state compared to liberal democracies. In doing so, I utilize the case of Hungary as a plausibility probe (Eckstein, 1975) to raise the question whether the opaque workings of illiberal politics raise the propensity of less sexual violence being reported. The case of Hungary is chosen for intensive analysis because, as I theorize it, the products of the illiberal state of Hungary can be interpreted as probabilistic scenarios that influence reporting of sexual violence.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Attitude, Beliefs, and Level of Trust Make Asking for Help Difficult

Several participants mentioned that after launching a concerted and systematic attack against CSOs (including victims' rights organizations), and hearing stories in the media emphasizing "real rape" (Estrich, 1988) scenarios (i.e., that rape is committed by strangers, especially migrants), and condemning women who live an independent and childless life, trust level became exceptionally low. In these hostile circumstances, women tend to seek help not from institutions but rather from close female family members, if at all. Asking for help is problematic not only in intimate partner violence and sexual victimization but also in typical situations women encounter, such as the hardships in social reproductive duties of child and elderly care. Interview participants asserted that admitting weakness in a culture of denial and estrangement puts them in a vulnerable situation where help is often denied, and further exploitation is highly possible:

It is hard to ask for help in any case in Hungary. It doesn't matter whether you are hungry, need firewood, or if someone has hurt you: It is awfully tough to show or communicate any kind of necessity. (Victims' rights advocate #1)

[A]sking for help in Hungary is stigmatizing. If you ask for help, you feel that you are differentiated: It is tangible in the way you are treated at the municipality if you go in to ask for an allowance, but the same happens at the services providing support for victims. Look at the appearance of the victim support services, observe the site of the police stations where people



can file a complaint: Even the physical spaces are stigmatizing. I can [swear word] understand each victim who doesn't want to ask for help. (Victims' rights advocate #4)

In Hungary, people don't go to pee if they need to pee, they're keeping it back....This is why, for example in intimate partner violence cases, the victim doesn't report anything for a long while. (Clinical psychologist #1)

Several participants mentioned that there are no adequate answers to sexual assault cases in the private sector in general. This is a significant change compared to before 2010 when transnational companies (such as GE; Iszkowska et al., 2021) pioneered in gender equality. After 2010, the government's concerted attack against gender mainstreaming caused a downturn in companies' efforts to create and strengthen gender equality (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2021). Today, there is a scarcity of ethical codes of conduct at the company level to process the cases. In addition, complaint mechanisms against sexual misconduct are inadequately regulated in institutions and workplaces (Iszkowska et al., 2021). Although CSOs had not been adequately supported even before the illiberal turn, now they are actively discredited and forced to operate in hiding mode. Consequently, CSOs are understaffed and underfinanced, staff turnover is high, and most co-workers are not trained:

People looking for jobs arrive there [to CSOs] from the employment centers without any experience. The person who helps victims today might have supported jobless people yesterday or stamped construction permits the day before—this is a normal career path today in Hungary. (Victims' rights advocate #3)

## 6.2. Illiberal Political Climate

Participants mentioned illiberal political climate and legislation as the most pervasive causes of sexual crimes staying unreported. After the illiberal turn, sexual violence became an increasingly taboo topic; there are no honest and expert-led discussions about it in mainstream media anymore. One participant highlighted the problem through an awareness-raising campaign against child sexual abuse aired in the media after the illiberal turn. Instead of opening the floor to discussions, the campaign triggered hate and had to be taken down days after release. This example shows that there are neither adequate tools nor accepted platforms to discuss family violence in the media:

There was an awareness campaign depicting sexual abuse of children within the family harshly and provocatively. People couldn't not talk about it....This campaign triggered a huge outrage; the fathers asso-

ciation, the parents' association, and other civil organizations demanded to take it down, so eventually it was. This is just one example of how much rejection there is towards just talking about these issues. (Child welfare advocate #4)

Participants vocalized that the political contextualization of the family as a protected unit hinders development in the systems of victim assistance and childcare, as well as education:

Human rights and women's rights are hijacked by politics. Traditional, so-called "family values" and traditional hierarchies between men and women and children come packaged with the conservative government. So...that influences education very much, and we see that in the field all the time. (Human rights advocate)

The government is absolutely denying the presence of violence....Politics is expropriating, monopolizing the topic of family, and denying the existence of violence within the family. (Child welfare advocate #2)

Child endangerment or child sexual abuse are politically denied topics. Politicians blame "rootless, liberal cosmopolitans" who, according to the government, are trying to compromise the government by overemphasizing non-realistic or non-existent problems. (Child welfare advocate #1)

A child welfare advocate mentioned that despite some professional trainings being available, cadres of newly established civil organizations, supported and funded by the government, are reluctant to enroll in them. Here, the political discreditation of gender-related topics adds to the lack of substantial professional guidelines and monitoring in GONGOs:

There is a training freshly introduced to the University of [anonymized] for coaches on physical, sexual violence and ethics called "abuse prevention training." But for political reasons, no one wants to take this course. (Child welfare advocate #4)

Participants emphasized that the refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention sends a sobering message to society and future victims therein, suggesting that women victims do not have the right to societal and institutional protection, and are alone with their "individual" problems. The government, seeking to support its anti-liberal, anti-gender ideology (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018), misinformed the public about the Istanbul Convention, stipulating that it would destroy the sacrosanctity of the family unit, and hence, it endangers the nation's survival:

There is this extra interesting phenomenon of fighting so-called "gender ideology"...by conservative,

patriarchist-minded groups and forces...which oppose the Istanbul Convention, based on attacking so-called “gender ideology,” which they define whichever way they want to define. They misinform the public about what this means, and that is very much coming on the wave of homophobia and gender identity. (Women’s rights advocate #1)

From the interviews, it became apparent that it is not only women whose victimization is underreported but also other vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQ+ individuals and sex workers. The victim-blaming attitude is strongly correlated with homophobic and transphobic attitudes, rendering most crimes against trans and non-binary people unreported.

## 7. Discussion

In a thematic interview analysis about reporting sexual violence in the case of Hungary, this research sought to generate the hypothesis according to which illiberal politics interfere with people’s ability to measure risks and to make decisions accordingly. The study is a mixed approach where narrative analysis is combined with a plausibility probe case study of Hungary as a vehicle for constructing and supporting broader theoretical generalizations (Levy, 2008) and develop a theoretical framework to explain underreporting of sexual violence.

The ban of gender studies programs in higher education (Pető, 2021a), the attacks on CSOs that support victims of family violence and survivors of sexual assault, removing a whole year of professional training from the teacher-training curriculum (Rankin, 2021a), limiting sex education to abstinence advocacy, and prohibiting gender-related and LGBTQ+ themes in K-12 schools (Rankin, 2021b) are all part of the illiberal political agenda. Similar legislative and political actions and their social consequences have been discussed in countless academic studies (Fodor, 2022; Krizsán & Zentai, 2017; Pető, 2021b; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018; Stanley, 2020). The current article weaves the above factors together by offering insight into the structural processes of sexual violence reporting. Although the interviews were conducted in 2017 and 2018, before the latest illiberal legal changes in Hungary, the study still sheds light on the dire situation of sexual violence victims and survivors. When asked why reporting sexual violence is so low in Hungary, the most alarming issues CSOs highlighted were the attitudes and low level of trust in the population, and the political climate. By supporting families but simultaneously denying the individual rights of women, illiberal gender politics undermines the rights of marginalized groups, such as victims of violence.

By applying Slovič’s concept of affective decision-making to how survivors of sexual violence decide whether to report their victimization, the author claims that the current political situation in Hungary appears to pose too much risk and too little benefit for those who

report. The model below helps think through the complexities of sexual violence reporting in an adverse social and political environment (Table 1).

What are the risks and benefits victims can realistically expect from reporting or asking for help? First and foremost, they run a high risk of revictimization. There is an elevated chance that in the hostile “gender climate” (Gülel, 2021), they will not be believed, their complaints will be swept under the rug, and even be ostracized by their families, workplaces, or even the whole country in publicized cases. Open discourse on family violence and victimization does not fit the illiberal political agenda; thus, victims’ stories will be discredited and they will be stigmatized. Moreover, victims’ rights are not legally recognized (in the provision of relationship violence and the Constitution, and by rejecting to ratify the Istanbul Convention); thus, they will face extreme difficulties finding legal protection. At the end of the day, victims will not get the help they need, their voices will be silenced, and they might end up being even more victimized and isolated than before.

However, the decision-making process is not only based on rational risk-benefit analyses. Victims’ decisions might also be led by emotions, and how they *perceive* reality, instead of truly investigating their options and the anticipated outcomes. Slovič posits that trust is asymmetric: Negative (trust-destroying) events carry much greater weight than positive events (Slovič, 1993) and define decision-making processes more than positive news. Although the illiberal state made efforts to aid victims (i.e., victims of domestic violence), the changes were only illusory, lacking the adequate legal and institutional help available to victims. Interview participants reflected on the poor qualities of state-provided services, lack of training and supervision and transparent monitoring. There is insufficient public information on the criteria used for training, no rules ensuring training continuity, no data showing whether personnel work adequately with victims of sexual violence, guarded by no monitoring procedure or guidelines (Gülel, 2021). This is to support Grzebalska and Pető’s (2018) concept of the polypore state which only builds a scaffolding of services, visible to the public but lacking professionalism and substance. Thus, the effectiveness of existing laws is questionable, and state-established victims’ services are only skeletons without context and actual functioning.

In an illiberal political environment, media conversations that exclude the victims’ voices or discussions in sexual violence entirely, and political propaganda that suggests that women’s only role is reproductive care-related, victims of sexual violence will be discouraged from reporting. Even if there are CSOs and legal avenues to fight for victims’ rights, victims will be discouraged from reporting by the pervasive anti-gender climate. Even if domestic and sexual violence is punishable in Hungary, the persistent denial of women’s human rights outside of their families will tear down most victims’ efforts to seek justice. On the other hand, when the

**Table 1.** Benefits and risks of reporting sexual violence, based on Slovič's model of the affective decision-making process.

Reporting sexual violence: Positive (Increased or high-rate reporting)	
<i>Benefit is high</i>	<i>Risk inferred to be low</i>
Victims' rights are recognized and protected (Constitutional rights, Istanbul Convention)	Low chance of revictimization (within the home or institutions, e.g., CSOs, police, criminal justice system)
Victims' voices are being heard in the media	Low chance of victim discrimination and stigmatization
CSOs are visible, available, adequately staffed, and financially able	No politically induced stigmatization (through populist propaganda, e.g., denial of women's rights)
Victims receive the help they need (advocacy, financial aid, shelter)	Low chance of victim blaming by family, community (neighborhood, workplaces), society (social media, media news)
Reporting sexual violence: Negative (Decreased or low-rate reporting)	
<i>Risk is high</i>	<i>Benefits inferred to be low</i>
High chance of revictimization (within the home or institutions, e.g., CSOs, police, criminal justice system)	Victims' rights are not recognized and protected (no meaningful legal protection, no victims' rights organizations present or, if present, not active)
High chance of victim discrimination and stigmatization	Victims' voices are silenced or suppressed (government owned media discourses)
High level of politically induced stigmatization (through populist propaganda, e.g., denial of women's rights)	CSOs are invisible, unavailable, understaffed, and underfinanced
High chance of victim blaming by family, community (neighborhood, workplaces), society (social media, media news)	GONGOs are visible but not available, and do not offer professional service
	Victims will not get the help they need (no advocacy, financial aid, shelter)

Source: Developed by the author, based on Slovič (2010).

media exonerate the accused, yet the survivor becomes labeled as a liar (Nyúl et al., 2018), then it will require genuine efforts to restore trust and encourage reporting.

The Hungarian government's recent efforts to establish victim-support services are meaningless compared to the efforts victims of sexual violence would have to make to break the walls of systematic denial and misogynistic social environment. The anti-gender climate is systematically built, and victims received the message that only "real rape" (Estrich, 1988) scenarios are to be accepted as "genuine" and everything other than that is not worthy of listening. As Gülel (2021) puts it, the "gender climate" is a disease so pervasive that the whole society is infected, including the police, prosecutors, judges, and employees of civil organizations. Attitudes are difficult to change. It would require developing honest, professional, victim-focused conversations on sexual violence in the media, introducing sex education in K-12 schools, allowing gender programs in universities, and encouraging gender-equity standards in government and industry.

Of course, it also would require strengthening CSOs and professional staffing and training GONGOs and national victim-support services to assist victims. Therefore, I argue that, besides ideology-free, victim-centered discussions, encouraging and rewarding gender equity quotas nationwide and providing support to CSOs must be some of the first steps on the road to restoring the trust of victims. Without women's rights being recognized as human rights and providing help to them as the primary victims of sexual violence, the illiberal concept of the protected (and patriotic) family unit itself becomes an empty shell (Iszkowska et al., 2021).

The current research is limited as neither is there a current estimation on how much sexual violence remains unreported due to illiberal politics, nor is it possible to estimate how much illiberal politics further discourage victims from reporting and asking for help. Similarly, it is hard to trace the direct effects of democratic backsliding—its effects are rather subtle. Still, the article, drawn on organizational and structural elements, attempted to establish associations between the



anti-gender climate and the propensity to report sexual violence. Although rape is already one of the most under-reported crimes, it became evident from the interviews that illiberal politics create an atmosphere that silences victims of sexual violence even more.

While interview participants draw causal associations between illiberal politics and the structural/organizational inadequacies, it was impossible to identify causality between illiberal politics and a low rate of reporting sexual violence. Therefore, this is a cautionary plausibility case study bolstering aspects on association in an illiberal political environment, warning that it can easily be copied in other nation states with similar illiberal tendencies (i.e., in the Czech Republic, Poland, or Slovakia; Havlík & Hloušek, 2021).

Now the question arises: What can be done in the helpless situation illustrated in the case of Hungary? Slovič (1999) points out that, in order to achieve effective communication and risk management strategies, those who promote and regulate health and safety need to understand the ways in which people typically think about and respond to risk. It is equally true to policymakers, service providers, and first responders to understand the societal recognition of specific risks and for mobilizing broad-scale structural change agendas. Individuals focus on risk within the framework of their specific situations, relationships, goals, and history; within this framework, they are highly susceptible to a variety of cognitive and affective forces as they absorb information and generate judgments about what poses threat to them, how large this threat is, and what they can or cannot do about it. Therefore, it is important to take away that, only by conveying information about available services and healthy relationships, can service providers help individuals make better decisions. Furthermore, this study can be informative to practitioners who seek to understand perceptions of risk, decision-making processes, and underlying structural issues that influence victims' reporting.

Choosing to discuss the Hungarian case as a plausibility probe, this article is the first attempt to shed light on a broader theoretical argument according to which reporting and asking for help from CSOs are more difficult in illiberal political regimes than in liberal democracies. I sought to generate the hypothesis according to which illiberal politics interfere with people's ability to measure risks and to make decisions accordingly. The case of Hungary can be seen as a vehicle for constructing and supporting broader theoretical generalizations (Levy, 2008) and develop a theoretical framework to explain underreporting of sexual violence. This hypothesis, together with the theoretical framework, must be tested further.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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#### About the Author



**Katalin Parti** is assistant professor of sociology at Virginia Tech. A Fulbright and Max Planck research scholar, her research interests include cybercrime offending and victimization, online scams in older adults, and sexual violence reporting.