

# Women and Social Transformation in Central-Eastern Europe\*

The 'Old Left' and the 'New Right'

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**Abstract:** The situation of women was improved in many respects under the totalitarian state socialist system. However, the improvement was brought about from the top down, without civil participation and control. Also, many legal and financial dispositions concerning the family, women and gender relations were fundamentally conservative. Such politics may not be seen as left-wing. The socialists never analysed their mistakes in this respect, so that a consistent left-wing agenda on family and gender policy is still missing irrespective of whether they are in government or in opposition.

Since the collapse of the old system, many new 'right' trends have gained ground. Conservative trends are harming the reproductive rights of women and are questioning the legitimacy of their work outside the home. Economic crisis and monetary pressures are leading to a wholesale reorganisation of former social policy dispositions, with a minimal state, the scaling down of universal and social insurance benefits, the spread of individually targeted social assistance and market or quasi-market solutions. This results in increasing child and female poverty. Also, the situation of women on the labour market is worsening because of the weakening of rights and the play of 'free' market forces.

The attitudes of women have been changing during and after 'socialism'. This is one of the foundations of further changes. The other and most important one is that in the new system civil and political rights have been strengthened. This is a gain for civil society in general. These rights allow the assertion of group interests, hence they may effectively serve the interests of women. For this to happen, however, it will take time, but this seems the only asset of women in the face of a 'patriarchal' state and an unrestrained market.

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## 1. The 'Old Left' – Before and After

It will take a long time before it is possible to give a credible brief account of the performance of the Soviet-type state socialist systems or totalitarian socialism. The difficulties of a fair assessment are not easily overcome in the case of women either, all the less

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\*) My own experience is limited to Hungary. Since there have been not only politically induced similarities but also extremely important differences among the countries of the bloc, I tried to gather information on other countries as well, so as to avoid unwarranted generalisations. The systematic account of the various (similar or different) trends is a task which is yet to be done.

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because politics varied a lot during the 40 or 70 years in question. Let us start this tentative and cursory assessment with some 'objective' trends.

The 'equality of women' was long a declared objective of politics. One of its foundations was the equalisation of formal rights. Acts were adopted at an early stage of the system assuring equal rights for women in politics (the right to vote and to be elected), and within marriage. This meant among other things the abolition of legal and social discrimination against illegitimate children, the right to divorce or to inherit, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Whether all these rights materialised or not is a different issue. While women certainly went to vote (the right having become an unconditional must for both sexes), they have remained vastly underrepresented in all leading positions.<sup>2</sup>

Another foundation was the enhancement of educational opportunities. The schooling of girls up to tertiary level was encouraged with no small success. For instance, the rate of girls in higher education went up from a pre-war level of 20 percent or less to over 50 percent. In this case there was no real pressure, and sometimes – particularly in earlier periods – some positive discrimination may have been applied in favour of women.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the educational structure of girls has remained somewhat crooked in all the countries. They have been overrepresented in educational channels leading to less well-remunerated or less 'marketable' jobs (such as teaching), and underrepresented particularly in vocational training and in the technical sciences. These – more or less spontaneous – one-sided options of girls has led to some segregation both in educational institutions and, as a consequence, also in the world of work. Whether the survival of traditional female educational and professional choices (operating usually against the long-term interests of women) was biologically or socially conditioned was a matter for debate even at the time [Ferge 1983].

The most important pillar of 'emancipation' was certainly the gainful employment of women. In all the countries 80 to 90 per cent of women had gainful employment at the end of the eighties. The anti-women bias – the underrepresentation of women on the higher levels of the job-hierarchy, a more or less segregated job-structure, and the 20 or 30 percent lower pay for women even in similar jobs plagued state-socialist countries by and large as much as most countries in Western Europe (with the possible exception of Sweden and Norway).

It is nowadays a controversial issue to what extent the politics of the gainful employment of women was motivated by strong ideological pressures; by the need of man-

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1) One (male) Hungarian sociologist long maintained that the system gave more rights to women than to men, allowing women to destroy the social fabric by undermining the family, socialising children in a feminine way etc. [Hernádi 1988].

2) It is a rare pleasure to look at the paintings or photos representing the members of the 'Politbureau', of the Central Committee or the Council of Ministers in any of the countries at any point in time. Women are always conspicuous by their absence. One could find at most one or two 'token' women in those illustrious bodies. The ratio of female MPs was 30 percent at most.

3) In later years, in Hungary at least, some negative discrimination against women could be detected in fields where they had become overrepresented, like in law, or where strong male interests could successfully prevail to curtail the entrance of women. In fact, the relationship between the prestige and the earnings of a profession on the one hand, and its degree of feminisation on the other had been uncovered already in the sixties and has been demonstrated systematically ever since [e.g. Sullerot 1968, Koncz 1985] which explains the increasing vocality of male interests.

power for extensive industrialisation; by the aspiration to hold down wages (so that only families with at least two earners could manage); or by the political will to exert maximum control over the population. It is also debated whether the high activity rate of women was only forced on society from the top down, or whether there was also a push in this direction from the bottom up. *Put more simply, the debate is about whether women wished to work or were only coerced to do so.*

In all probability, many of the above factors and perhaps others too, played some role in shaping the final outcome. The impact of symbolic coercion or violence (to enforce the norm to work outside the home) is undeniable, and so are its negative effects, such as the overburdening of women, and the weakening of the already declining family. It may also be that retrospective evaluation is highly influenced by the later political climate. Right around the time of the collapse of the system it was indeed fashionable to vilify everything belonging to the past, so that all the facts and measures concerning women were interpreted by many as the malevolent intervention of a macho state wronging women. In the later years opinions have become more nuanced. This diversity of evaluation is easy to detect in the literature both East and West. It is emphatically present in the current Eastern literature. For instance, Sieminska [1994] sees the work of women in Poland as being only enforced from above. According to Panova et al. [1993: 17] in Bulgaria “the right to work outside the family (...) turned into a burden, a compulsion”. In Ostner’s [1994: 52] formulation based on survey results “East-German women not only wanted but had to work to make ends meet”. Analysing historical evidence, Havelková [1993: 64] suggests, though, that “In the Czech case, the high employment of women (...) was not resented by women as much as is sometimes claimed today in sweeping criticisms against the totalitarian system”. Szalai [1991] has also many doubts and queries. I am unable to arbitrate in these debates. On the basis of personal experience and of some – always debatable<sup>4</sup> – statistics, it seems to me that in the early years the aspiration of women for more freedom played a larger role, and the feeling of pressure from above was weaker than in the later decades. This may only be an optical illusion, because I was just at the beginning of my adult life in the post-war years and strongly identified with the socialist view on the work of women. However, Heinen [1995: 95] notes also for Poland that according to surveys done at different periods, there was a shift between the sixties and the eighties in women’s attitudes towards work from a more ‘positive’ to a more ‘critical’ attitude.

The work of women outside the home was supported by a heavily subsidised network of services offering alternatives to home chores (laundries, canteens, etc.), and more importantly by alternative child care. Child-care institutions were spreading with some delay: ideology was at its strongest in the fifties, while the expansion of the child-care network started in all satellite countries in the sixties. From then on, it developed rather rapidly almost everywhere. With the exception of Poland, for instance, from the 1980s onwards, 80 to 90% of children between 3 and 6 had access to kindergartens. Nurseries for children under 3 had always been less all-encompassing, often causing difficulties if

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<sup>4</sup>) I am referring to the first post-war survey on women which was carried out by the Central Statistical Office in 1960. In this the majority of women expressed their wish to, or satisfaction with, paid work, and not only for financial reasons. These results may be suspect because the survey was done in 1960, when self-censorship, or hidden political fears may have distorted the answers. [*Women...* 1962].

women with a young child wanted or had to continue to pursue a gainful occupation. It is again a controversial issue whether these institutions served essentially indoctrination and regimentation (for former East-Germany, see for example Ostner [1993]), or the genuine needs of children and women or families.<sup>5</sup>

The need for the work of women weakened, however, with time. An alternative for institutionalised early child care was found in the late sixties. The first paid and job-protected extended leave (initially two, somewhat later three years leave) was introduced in Hungary in 1967<sup>6</sup> over and above the relatively long (around 20 weeks) fully-paid maternity leave [Kamerman and Kahn 1991]. The other institutions for 'parenting' were not weakened thereby, but ideological pressure changed the orientation, beginning to favour child-rearing at home, and the home-making role of women. As a matter of fact, in all the countries of the bloc 'parenting' politics had become strongly influenced by pronatalist concerns from usually the late sixties onwards. The assessment of Heitlinger [1993: 96] for Czechoslovakia is valid for most countries: "With the arrival of socialist pronatalism in the late 1960s, many facilities and measures adopted in the 1950s on egalitarian grounds were expanded to meet explicitly demographic objectives." It is also generally valid that "While popular (...) the pronatalist measures had a predictable negative impact on women's careers and the domestic division of labour" [ibid.]. The pronatalist concerns had a weaker or stronger impact on the right to chosen parenthood, to sexuality, and abortion almost everywhere, with the most tragic practice and consequences in Romania [Harsanyi 1993].

All in all, however, the *objective* situation of women has probably improved everywhere as compared to the pre-war situation. Their paid work outside the home contributed to the well-being of the family (at least it helped to make ends meet); their educational advancement and the work outside the home enriched (at least in the majority of cases) their life experience; their status as earners weakened their former oppression within and outside the family and made them (somewhat) less subservient in some walks of life.<sup>7</sup> Also, it attenuated female poverty, especially in the case of mothers who practically all started to work, and of older women who obtained a pension in their own right. Indeed, despite many inequities and inequalities subsisting between men and women, the 'feminisation of poverty' was much less salient than in most western countries.

The question is, to what extent was this policy left-wing? Formally it followed some of the tenets laid down in the early classics (Bebel for one) or in socialist blue-prints. If, however, we try to apply it to the welfare state models worked out by Jane Lewis, we encounter serious difficulties. Lewis makes a distinction between three main gender welfare regimes, namely a strong male-breadwinner state (for instance Britain), a

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<sup>5</sup>) The pedagogical and psychological views influencing the work of teachers in Hungarian kindergartens were, for instance, strongly influenced by Western 'progressive' or liberal child pedagogy.

<sup>6</sup>) The reasons were not exclusively 'pro-family'. The nurseries were expensive; there was fear of unemployment caused by the economic reform to be introduced in 1968, etc.. Still, the measure became very popular and was gradually introduced in many countries.

<sup>7</sup>) A. Titkow supports this view with the usual necessary caveats: "It is probably true that coping with the demand of paid work, superimposed on the traditional roles of women, has bettered women's self-evaluation. It has served not only as a source of gratification but as a counterweight to the problems work caused to women's mental and physical health, and also as an asset to women's authority in the family." [Titkow 1993: 253]

modified male-breadwinner state (for instance France), and a weak male-breadwinner state (for instance Sweden). The last model is the closest to what may be termed 'left' politics. These categories are based on the politics concerning mothers and wives; on the respective rules of social security, on the availability of supporting services, child-care in the first place, and on the situation of women on the labour market. On the face of it, then, many practices in the Eastern bloc countries were close to the weak male-breadwinner model. However, already Lewis warns us that weak male-breadwinner policies may be motivated not so much by concerns for gender equality as by labour market shortages or pronatalism [Lewis 1992].

Taking into account the – to say the least – mixed motivation of family policy, and also some political aspects to which we will soon turn, a former assessment of the state socialist welfare regime also seems to apply to the politics concerning women:

“despite formal similarities, the liberal and emancipating dimension of the Scandinavian model was entirely absent from the state socialist model of welfare. It had even less in common with the other regime types in Europe. If one wants to label the state socialist welfare system, it could be described as an *anti-liberal- statist-hierarchized-socialist mix, with conservative bits thrown in*” [Ferge and Kolberg 1992: 207].

It would be tedious to prove in detail the validity of this assertion. The anti-liberal, over-centralised, statist character of all politics does not need detailed documentation here. Let me just mention some of its salient characteristics. All decisions were always taken at the top, and the influence of the citizens (or, rather, of the subjects) was, if it existed at all, weak and indirect. It was in this case 'politics for us, but without us'. Rigid anti-liberalism banned all forms of citizen's participation, grass-root movements, spontaneous associations as well as initiatives of individuals or of small groups. The totalitarian logic (even when it became milder) rejected micro-solidarities or partial identities, that is solidarities on a lower level than the international or the national, and identities other than the global identity of “the socialist man” [Avineri 1991]. Hence spontaneous women's movements, feminist or otherwise, never emerged, and women could not identify with each other, expressing collectively, for instance, the wrongs which harmed all of them.

The other, private dimension of this has perhaps even more serious implications. Because of the impossibility of free public discourse, *gender relations never became a public issue*. In public life, work, studies, culture, or even politics, women have become (almost) equal, and they may have felt (almost) equal. But in the private sphere, in partner relations, within the family as well as in the private (interpersonal) side of relations – whether in politics or at the workplace – the traditional construction of the role of men and women remained by and large untouched.

The conservatism of politics concerning women became particularly clear in the later decades, when (essentially for better political control, but also for strengthening the basis of the intergenerational transmission of recently acquired advantages and privileges) politics started to idolise the family. This meant, as already pointed out, the provision of welfare incentives for the home-making woman; more or less serious limitations of human rights in the case of abortion and divorce; the condemnation of 'illegal', out of marriage relationships; taboos placed on sexuality, especially on homosexual relationships, on wife and child abuse, and such like. The 'communist' morality relating to

women and the family varied from country to country, but in quite a few cases it became similar to the most orthodox Catholic morality.

To sum up: there were undoubtedly many deliberate steps which improved the position of women. However, the politics informing these decisions was always extremely inconsistent, driven as much by half-understood socialist ideology as by non-explicit male interests and the interests of 'politics'. Because of these contradictory pressures and the absence of a clear political framework the political practice was also extremely erratic. In fact, after the consolidation of totalitarian socialism no political theorist ever tried to elaborate a consistently left-wing (socialist or social democratic) family policy or gender policy. The party-state just did not need them, and (the hardly existing) civil society was not allowed to touch the issue.

The problems stemming from the lack of a consistently left-wing family and gender policy have become apparent since the transition. While there was only one party, it was by and large 'natural' that it was divided on many issues. But in a multi-party system one would expect left-wing parties to have left policies, and right-wing parties right ones. Such is not the case though in many countries, and emphatically not in the countries under transformation. In Hungary for instance, where an ultra-conservative government was in place for the first four years, the socialists, then in opposition, often reacted to conservative endeavours (for instance, in the debate on abortion) with the 'correct' left-wing arguments. But as soon as they came to power in 1994, and had to implement a consistent policy, it became apparent that they had never reflected on the contents of the pre-transition family and gender policy, neither were they able to work out any new programme.

## 2. The New Right

The neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideologies which are still in ascendance throughout the world have had a particular attraction in the transition countries, where formerly only one ideology was recognised as legitimate. This very understandable swing of the pendulum has often been analyzed by political scientists. Here it is necessary to point out some of the implications of these ideologies which have relevance for the situation of women.

### 2. 1. Conservatism

The well-known leading values of conservatism assign a high priority to religion, particularly the Catholic Church, to the family, and in some cases to the nation.<sup>8</sup> In the field of *social policy*, over and above the encouragement of interpersonal charity, the main practical principle advocated by the Catholic Church is subsidiarity, a shift of responsibility for help or social action in general from the center or higher levels to the lowest practically possible level. It is widely recognised that subsidiarity is a heavily gendered principle [Duncan 1996, Ostner 1993]. The consequences of this principle coincide with those of the neo-liberal efforts to cut back the state. From the present perspective they both imply a growing role of the caring functions of the family, which means first and foremost increasing the tasks and responsibilities of women for the care of children, the elderly, and the sick. In post-socialist countries these old or increased burdens may have gone unattended, or a particular 'benefit for home nursing' may have been introduced or

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<sup>8</sup>) The racist/ethnocentric orientation of the extreme right will not be discussed here.

adapted to the new conditions. In this case institutional underpinning and official recognition have been promoting the changing role of (mainly) women.<sup>9</sup>

However, the role of conservatism and the Church has a particular relevance for *family policy*. This affects – to name only the most important elements – the *work of women* outside the home, *child bearing* and *child rearing*.

As far as work is concerned, the ideological pressure of the fifties, which forced women out of the home, has been replaced by another ideological pressure suggesting that the employment of women, and particularly mothers runs against the best interests of the child, of the family, and therefore of society. Since the proper place of the woman is supposed to be the home, the gainful employment of women is ideologically and politically devalued. These efforts are well served by growing unemployment. In all the post-socialist countries but Hungary, the rate of female unemployment is higher than that of males. Moreover, the non-registered loss of jobs (returning home without registering as unemployed) affects mainly women. Overall data are still scarce, but the former high employment rate of women has certainly diminished. According to a survey covering five Central-Eastern European countries, the rate of 'active' women in the 15-60 age-range did not reach 70 percent even in the Czech Republic, and was near or under 50 percent in two other countries. This was also in most countries significantly lower than the activity rate of men. (This result is only slightly modified if we consider the 15-55 age-range for women.) (See Table 1.)<sup>10</sup>

Table 1. The percentage rate of active earners within the 15-60 age range in five countries

|                 | Czech Republic | Slovakia | Hungary | Germany | Poland |
|-----------------|----------------|----------|---------|---------|--------|
| Male rate       | 79             | 56       | 60      | 60      | 70     |
| Female rate     | 67             | 47       | 55      | 50      | 64     |
| n (all actives) | 1336           | 1166     | 1077    | 887     | 1477   |

Source: SOCO.

Conservative views on *child bearing* have been forcefully presented in quite a few countries. This picture is also varied though, depending on former practices. In Romania, where the situation was by far the worst, the revolution started in Timisoara with doctors performing free abortions, and legislation has been accordingly changed since [Harsanyi 1993]. Because of this past it is now practically impossible to put the issue on the political agenda. In Bulgaria the issue of abortion has not been raised as yet [Todorova 1993]. In the Czech Republic where the practice became liberal in 1987, "since the fall of

<sup>9</sup>) As was already mentioned in the case of child care grants, it is hard to evaluate unambiguously benefits which reward and reinforce symbolically the traditional role of women. On the one hand it is better to have some financial reward for a task one has to do anyway. On the other hand these benefits have always a negative impact on the trends of 'emancipation' and gender equality.

<sup>10</sup>) The survey was carried out as part of the SOCO project initiated and co-ordinated by the Institute for Human Studies, Vienna. The countries covered included the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, and the eastern states of Germany that used to be East Germany. The first results are presented in the International report on the Social Consequences of the Transition, written by Zs. Ferge, E. Sik, P. Róbert, and F. Albert. The survey is usually referred to as the SOCO survey.

Communism, the abortion debate has been broadened (...) pitting 'a woman's right to choose' against 'protection of the unborn child'" [Heitlinger 1993: 101]. This author believes though that the curtailment of rights is not likely in the Czech Republic, she is less sure about future developments in Slovakia. According to Milic [1993], the curtailment of women's rights is on the agenda in all the countries of former Yugoslavia. The determined attempt of the conservative parties under the first government (1990-94) in the Hungarian Parliament to restrict birth control rights was defeated only under the pressure of civil society. In Poland a draft law submitted to the Sejm in 1989 proposed just before the parliamentary elections a total ban on abortion [Fuszara 1993]. Genuine mass mobilisation prevented legislation going the whole way as proposed by the Senate. However, the struggle has continued in 1997 as shown by the decision of the Supreme Court advocating a change in the current legislation and a return to the position stressing the inviolability of human life. The biggest losers seem to have been the women of former East Germany where – despite extremely strong resistance – the more restrictive West German legislation was extended to the whole of the newly united country. According to many observers, this was the major bone of contention, and almost a stumbling block, in the debates on the unification. The endeavours to promote giving birth by the 'stick' had been to some extent counterbalanced by 'carrots' rewarding maternity. For instance, the Hungarian Parliament extended in 1993 the family allowance to the yet unborn foetus. (This measure was abolished in 1995.) They also introduced a sort of mother's wage for mothers with 3 or more children. Similar steps were also under consideration in other countries. However, the neo-liberal forces successfully opposed all the efforts – conservative or otherwise – to improve by state action the situation of mothers and children. In some cases the ethnocentric bias of conservatism had a negative effect on families. One case in point is the Serbian proposal (in 1990) to increase family benefits for families with three children but to abolish all benefits for families with more than three children (the majority of whom are Albanians).

*Child-rearing* has also become an ideologically loaded issue. If the place of the woman is the home, and if the main duty and privilege of the woman is to bear and rear children, then there is no more need of the former network of child-care institutions. As a direct consequence, nurseries for the under-3s have become undesirable and their number has contracted almost everywhere. The cuts also affected kindergartens, despite the fact that their pedagogical role was more widely accepted. According to a UNICEF report ["Children..." 1997], a smaller or larger decline of child-care institutions may be observed in all the transition countries, if not for ideological, then for financial reasons, and this affects both nurseries and kindergartens [Fajth 1996, "Children..." 1997] (Table 2). These cutbacks harmonise, of course, with the minimalist welfare program of the neo-liberals.

## 2. 2. *Liberalism*

Neo-liberalism had entered the scene in some countries, mainly Hungary and Poland, already under the former system from at least the late seventies onwards. However, it remained somewhat shamefaced and represented more of a hidden than an open agenda. After the disappearance of the official ideology, it was able to become part and parcel of official politics in all the countries in transition. Obviously, the liberalisation of the economy, including the creation of a market and the reintroduction of private ownership, and of politics complete with many freedoms and new institutions such as political par-

ties, independent courts and such like was everywhere an absolute must. These changes were supported by a huge majority of the citizens. However, neo-liberal thinking also affects social policy, and thereby the everyday living conditions of the citizens in many ways. This is much less in line with the expectations of the large majority of the citizens who, at the time of the transition wanted not only political freedom and a market, but also hoped for a Swedish-type welfare state 'written large' [Myles and Brym 1992: 29]. All the surveys conducted since demonstrate that these expectations have remained very intense [e.g. Ferge et al. 1995], but have been heavily disappointed.

Table 2. Children in nurseries and kindergartens in selected CEE countries

|          | 1989                               | Most recent year<br>available since 1990 | 1989                                    | 1995 |
|----------|------------------------------------|--|---|------|
|          | Children in nurseries <sup>a</sup> |  | Pre-primary enrolment rate <sup>b</sup> |      |
| Bulgaria | 12.9                               | 9.9 ('94)                                | 93.0 ('85)                              | 67.5 |
| Czech    | 13.8                               | 1.7 ('93)                                | 99.3                                    | 88.6 |
| Hungary  | 11.7                               | 10.9('95)                                | 91.0 ('85)                              | 86.9 |
| Poland   | na                                 | na                                       | 48.7                                    | 45.3 |
| Romania  | 4.4                                | 3.2('94)                                 | 82.9                                    | 58.4 |
| Russia   | 34.7                               | 19.8('94)                                | 69.3                                    | 54.0 |
| Slovakia | na                                 | na                                       | 91.5                                    | 70.8 |

a) Percentage of all 0-2 years old in nurseries

b) In percentage of the relevant population

Source: UNICEF: 97 and 158

New endeavours are aimed at assuring the free choice and the autonomy of citizens. The instruments of this objective are the 'minimal state' with substantially reduced taxation, the pluralisation, privatisation and marketisation of former public services and public goods, and the limitation of state help (if any) to the 'truly needy'. J. Kornai [1992] coined the expression of a "premature welfare state", implying that the Hungarian state in the eighties was overdeveloped and profligate. He has suggested the introduction of another "pure" model. In this model the responsibility of the state for public welfare should be strictly limited: "the state gives financial help from the taxpayers' money only to the needy", and builds up the legal framework for the operation of the non-profit and for-profit insurance companies or of other marketed services including health and unemployment insurance [Kornai 1994]. A Czech economist, Kinkor [1996] goes much further: he negates the validity of such concepts as the public interest or the public good; he maintains that the state had to stop interfering not only in the economy, but also in education, health care, culture, and housing which should be regulated by free exchange; and he qualifies unemployment as purely an individual problem, and therefore "the foolish battle of governments with unemployment is nothing other than a distortion of this extremely valuable information source" [Kinkor 1966: 119, quoted by Potůček 1966: 6].

It is understandable that the enormity of the task and the lack of any historical experience led to many mistakes. Partly because of the fatal attraction of the above ideology, many of the badly needed reforms went overboard. As the authors of a World Bank book note:

"Because the previous system failed to produce many of its predicted economic and social benefits, radical reformers during the transition have been quick to con-

demn, and even to discard, almost everything that existed during the past. As a result, there is now a serious risk that, at least in the health sector, some of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe may throw out the baby with the bathwater” [Preker and Feachem: 289-290].

In fact, the risk has not been limited to the health sector. Too liberal policies in, for example, foreign trade, or ideologically based solutions in privatization, or unthinking monetarist shock-therapies have probably even harmed the economy. The vulnerability of social policy has been much greater though. However, it is true that the fraction of the GDP redistributed for social policy purposes has usually remained at its former level for some years after the transformation, and has only lately started to shrink. (Of course in absolute terms the value diminished from the start with a 15 percent or larger drop in officially recorded GDP.)

The cuts go parallel with structural changes. Some of them have already taken place, many more are in the offing. Some changes are responses to new needs such as the introduction of unemployment insurance, the development of active labour market policies, or the introduction of new forms of social assistance. Others operate in the above-mentioned direction of the minimal state. The bulk of price subsidies were abolished without any compensation. Universal or near-universal (employment-related) benefits such as the family allowance have been abrogated everywhere and replaced by means-tested variants [“Children...” 1997: 100]. Universal services have been generally transformed into insurance (in the case of health services) or partly marketised (some parts of the health system, or schools in some countries). The level of benefits has been cut back, not only because of the shortage of funds (affecting for instance pensions), but also on ideological grounds. Unemployment benefits offered at first on a relatively good level were cut back in order ‘to give more incentive to get people back to work’; social assistance to stimulate self-help and to avoid a ‘dependency culture’; health and pension standards in order to give space to, and incentive for, private (market) provisions. In many areas low or no fees had been replaced by relatively high or market prices (homes for the elderly, school meals). It has to be emphasised that the ‘quasi-market’ solution widespread in England (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1994) implying that the state retains its financing and regulatory role and abandons service delivery, is seen with less favour than genuine marketisation.

Theoretically both the state and the market are gender-blind. In practice they are not. Feminist analysts started to show over a decade ago [Williams 1989, Walby 1990, Lewis 1993] the gender biases built into the operation of a ‘patriarchal state’.<sup>11</sup> However, it has long been recognised that the elimination of the ‘spontaneous’ or quasi-intended gender bias of state politics needed deliberate intervention, often prompted by civil movements, but ultimately implemented (paradoxically or not) by state action. Interestingly enough, once civil and political rights had been extended to women, the bulk of interventions to promote gender equality have usually focused – rightly or wrongly – on the labour market, more precisely on the conditions enabling women to become equal

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<sup>11</sup>) More recently, Skocpol [1992] argued that a ‘woman-friendly’ welfare state was historically not inconceivable, since this is how welfare politics started in the United States. This seems to be, however, a unique case.

partners (competitors) on the labour market.<sup>12</sup> Practically all the directives and recommendations of the European Union (starting with Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome of 1957 recommending the principle of equal pay to equal work) relate to this point.<sup>13</sup> They cover the equal pay of women (1975), equal treatment at work (1976), equal treatment in social security (1979 and 1986), minimum maternity leave rights (1992), and the possibilities of 'reconciling occupational and family responsibilities' (The Social Charter 1989) which seems possible only by providing public caring services [Duncan 1996]. Evidence suggests that even when directives, pieces of legislation, monitoring, some civil control and even a court of redress exist, the situation of women may deteriorate because market forces under the present conditions are increasingly hard to curb, and public support in employment and child care are low priorities. Thus the position of women relative to men has deteriorated on the labour market in the last decade or so in the European Union in terms of unemployment, job segregation, their presence in atypical and non-protected jobs, and the earning gap [*Women...* 1994]. Also, the feminisation of poverty seems to be on the increase mainly because of the increasing number of single mothers.

The question is what happens to women when public commitments are shrinking, when the state is both unwilling and unable to intervene in market transactions, and when the gender issue is almost absent from the political agenda. The answer is almost self-evident. If nothing happens to counteract the sociologically foreseeable consequences of very unequal conditions and power relations, the majority of women are likely to be among the losers of the social transformation. The winners among them will be – and already are – the best educated younger women who have an entrepreneurial spirit: the world has opened for them.

Of course, the processes which may be detrimental to women have only started. They are also not always properly followed up by appropriate statistics or monitoring. Still, some information is already available, and informed guesses may also be advanced. As far as the position of women on the *labour market* is concerned, the decline of economic activity in the case of both sexes, and the higher risk of unemployment for women have already been noted. The preparation of men and women for the requirements of the market seems to be increasingly unequal. While the educational level of men and women used to be equal or women had an advantage, the type of education of men seems to have been always more 'market-oriented' and therefore better adaptable to the new conditions. Nowadays men appear to be more and more overrepresented in those educational streams leading to highly rewarded posts.

More detailed studies show some causes and consequences of the increasing vulnerability of women. Women have more difficulties in getting a job (even with the same qualifications as men) because they are less 'flexible'. In other words, when young, they are a risk to the employer because of absences due to pregnancy or the illness of a child. (Heinen [1995: 94] reports cases when private company directors requested a written

<sup>12</sup>) Some particularly vulnerable female groups, like mothers or old women, the core groups leading to the feminisation of poverty may appear as exceptions. The redress of their situation may require only additional benefits. Ultimately though, their poverty is also caused by their tenuous relation to the labour market.

<sup>13</sup>) Of course, the documents of the Union repeatedly emphasise that the Union concerns itself rather 'with workers than with citizens in general' [Duncan 1996: 407], and this in itself is significant.

promise from women applicants not to get pregnant for a certain period. Kotowska [1995: 85] records that the personal characteristics and family conditions of female applicants are more closely scrutinised than those of men.) Because labour laws or legislation protecting women are weakened or may be easily disregarded, women have to accept unhealthy jobs, long hours or work-shifts hard to adjust to family needs, and various new forms of exploitation and harassment [Moghadan 1996].<sup>14</sup> Even when these and similar practices are illegal, women do not protest for fear of not getting or losing a job. Where a benefit still exists, such as extended child care leave, a decreasing proportion of women are making use of it and for a shorter time. They are also anxious for their job because they may be made redundant if not immediately after the return, then shortly afterwards.<sup>15</sup> 'Higher' age (over 40 or so) is in general an obstacle to re-employment, but in case of women increasing sexism creates additional difficulties. Both women and men are harmed by unprotected jobs on the black market, but women may be in an even weaker situation. The wage gap has increased partly because women seem to accept low wages and bad working conditions more easily than men, and partly because the rapid widening of inequality in earnings profits particularly those in top positions rarely attained by women. One may assume, albeit research would be needed to prove the point, that the specific psychological disposition of women may mean that they are less ready (in a statistically significant way) than men to espouse, and to adjust their behaviour to, the dominant values of the market, especially competitiveness and exclusively profit-oriented 'rationality'. If true, this may harm their chances in reemployment, promotion, and so on.

The withdrawal of the state from the social sphere and the institutional changes in *welfare provisions* have a negative impact on families and individuals in general, but they may affect women in particular ways. The shrinking of child-care services is a clear case in point. If there are no free or cheap institutions offering good day care for children, the work of the mothers becomes either extremely difficult, or too costly, or outright impossible. The consequence is a decrease in income, or increasing poverty. The result is similar when family benefits become targeted and their level is eroded.

Children (or families with children) in general, and single mothers in particular have become particularly vulnerable. The ratio of children in poverty has increased dramatically, usually more than that of the whole population (Table 3). This obviously hits parents as well.

There are hardly any data on single mothers. According to the SOCO survey (covering five Central-Eastern European countries) their situation was particularly bad in Poland and East Germany (Table 4). In East Germany mothers have become one of the poorest groups because of a combination of all the above problems and because unemployment benefits were relatively good for men at least [Engfer 1995]. According to Eng-

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<sup>14</sup>) The book referred to is a collection of papers about the experiences of women with the market covering China, Vietnam, Cuba and the European countries Bulgaria, Poland, and Russia. The book is still in manuscript so that quotations and references cannot be offered. It is though a fascinating chronicle covering legislation, statistics and case studies, all written by women from the respective countries.

<sup>15</sup>) Under state-socialism – with state enterprises and co-operatives – it was easy for the state to enforce the protection of these jobs. With private employers, especially with foreign companies the situation is different.

fer, the adverse conditions of single mothers represent a new development in East Germany. As shown in the same table, families with one or sometimes two children are usually better off than families with more than two children, so that larger families are in particular danger of poverty. However, single mothers seem to be even in greater danger. On the basis of Table 4, the Hungarian situation seems to be relatively favourable, but in 1994 the family benefits had as yet been untouched.

Table 3. Incidence of poverty among the whole population and children in selected countries

|                |      | Low income<br>(35,40 or 45% of the average wage) |          | Poverty<br>(60% of low) income line |          |
|----------------|------|--|----------|-------------------------------------|----------|
|                |      | Total<br>population                              | Children | Total<br>population                 | Children |
| Bulgaria       | 1990 | 13.8   | 17.7     | 2.0                                 | 32.7     |
| (45%)          | 1994 | 63.5   | 71.9     | 32.7                                | 42.5     |
| Czech Republic | 1989 | 4.2  | 4.2      | 0.2                                 | 0.3      |
| (35%)          | 1992 | 26.7   | 40.1     | 1.4                                 | 1.2      |
| Hungary        | 1989 | 10.1   | 7.0      | 1.1                                 | 1.8      |
| (40%)          | 1994 | 22.0   | 27.5     | 6.1                                 | 9.5      |
| Poland         | 1989 | 23.1   | 30.6     | 5.8                                 | 8.4      |
| (40%)          | 1992 | 36.3   | 52.6     | 10.9                                | 19.9     |
| Romania        | 1989 | 28.2   | 34.3     | 7.0                                 | 8.9      |
| (45%)          | 1994 | 65.7   | 75.7     | 29.1                                | 37.5     |
| Slovakia       | 1989 | 4.1  | 5.8      | 0.1                                 | 0.1      |
| (40%)          | 1993 | 31.3   | 52.1     | 5.1                                 | 9.4      |

Source: ["Children...": 24].

Table 4. Equivalent income in families with children in % of households without children, head under 60, 1994<sup>16</sup>

|                     | Czech Republic | Poland | Hungary | Germany | Slovakia |
|---------------------|----------------|--------|---------|---------|----------|
| Single parent       | 69             | 42     | 81      | 63      | 66       |
| couple, 1 child     | 89             | 56     | 90      | 90      | 89       |
| couple, 2 children  | 78             | 48     | 86      | 76      | 74       |
| couple, 3 +children | 55             | 44     | 85      | 94      | 57       |

Source: SOCO

The increasing poverty of families affects women also in other ways. According to previous research [Sas 1976] they have always been predominantly responsible for the finances of the household, and they have been the main agents in official matters relating

<sup>16</sup>) The number of the families observed is relatively low in some sub-groups, so that the results have to be handled with caution:

|                     | Czech Republic | Poland | Hungary | Germany | Slovakia |
|---------------------|----------------|--------|---------|---------|----------|
| n, families total   | 112            | 203    | 150     | 101     | 143      |
| out of it:          |                |        |         |         |          |
| Single parents      | 52             | 60     | 76      | 142     | 48       |
| couple, 3+ children | 39             | 123    | 49      | 24      | 80       |

to the family. Hence they may experience more difficulties than previously in making ends meet.<sup>17</sup> And it is probable that the humiliating experience of asking for assistance and dealing with bureaucratic red tape is also mostly their lot.

The gains from liberalism are basic. The basic liberal value is freedom, and indeed the foremost gain of the transition is freedom in many meanings of the term. It is thanks to the liberal strand in politics that civil and political rights have become firmly established. The new freedoms also allow women to correct former failures, to start grass-root movements, to initiate a public discourse both on gender-relations and on the 'women's issue' in general, or to put pressure on politicians to take this issue seriously, if not for other reasons than in order to conform to the established norms of the European Union. However, as will be shown presently, very little seems to be happening in this area.

### 3. Changing Attitudes

#### 3.1. Attitudes

The transformation of social relations on the macro and micro level was part and parcel of the egalitarian socialist project from 1945 onwards. The relationships in practically all the countries of Central-Eastern Europe before the war were heavily hierarchised, inequalitarian, and sometimes, as in Hungary, almost feudal. This meant extremely asymmetrical relations between rich and poor, employer and employee, and also between men and women. This asymmetry was built into the 'habitus' of people, and expressed itself among others in body language as well as in verbal communication. In the Hungarian language for instance, as in French or German, there are two ways of addressing people. The asymmetry meant that the employer addressed the worker with "*tu*", and the worker had to answer "*vous*". This same pattern could prevail between master and servant, parent and child, or husband and wife.

The forty years of state socialism can be seen as a forced modernization project. One element of it was the modernization of the above relations. Apparently, in this case there was a breakthrough. The spontaneous subservience of workers or servants practically disappeared. After all, even if workers never believed that they were the 'ruling class', and used to make fun of this slogan, they could not help but feel a change in their social standing concerning their objective conditions as well as their relative position within society [Kemény 1985]. The same applies to women. The spontaneous deference and submission both in private and public life has weakened – even though vestiges have survived. One of the most telling ones is that in public debates (political or scientific meetings included) the 'big white man' may address the woman opponent by her given name, while he expects the woman so addressed to give him his full title and/or family name.

All in all it seems that despite the big divide between the power elite and the rest of the population under the former system, people in different walks of life started to

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<sup>17</sup>) The vastly increased supply of consumer goods and the disappearance of queuing in the 'consolidated' countries are certainly a gain for everybody. However, we do not know to what extent is this a compensation for those who can afford only the cheapest products. Also, price-hunting which is practised by a large majority everywhere [Sik 1995] is also time-consuming. More psychological tests would be needed to know how people in general, women in particular, evaluate these various trade-offs.

believe themselves less submissive, less dependent, and more equal. The habitus started to change. And since this element of the socialist project cannot be considered particularly socialist, but an integral part of a normal process of modernisation, one may hope that the change cannot and will not be reversed.

Attitudes have also changed in other areas of life. One important field is the attitude to work. I have already discussed the controversial experience under state socialism. The situation is no less controversial nowadays. There are comparative survey data relating to 1988 and 1994 on this issue. Apparently, men used to be far more conservative than women before the transition and came closer to the outlook of women in 1994. However, this is not only because men have become somewhat less conservative, but also because women may have become more so. The opinion according to which mothers, especially mothers with small children, have to remain home has become more prevalent [Tóth 1995]. This shift does not seem to hold for all the aspects of women's work. In most countries women seem to be starting to re-evaluate their former working experience. "Bulgarian women entered the post-communist epoch with a very positive attitude to working. Only one-fifth of women, compared to one-third of men, think that women should stay home and not work (...) Even if they were fully secure financially, 70 percent of working women would still prefer to work full-time" [Petrova 1993: 26]. In several surveys in Russia it was found that around 90 percent shared this view [Waters 1993: 292].<sup>18</sup> Šiklová [1993: 82] quotes results from a relatively early Czech survey with lower figures, but still with a positive bias for work outside the home. (28% would 'definitely' work, 32% 'would consider it', and 40% would 'definitely not work'). Women of former East Germany continue to be more work-oriented than their Western counterparts.

It is anybody's guess as to what extent the changes are influenced by new ideological pressures, by real convictions which could not be expressed freely beforehand, or by the weakening supports for working women; and to what extent are the continuities motivated by the inertia of habits, by continued or increased existential necessities, or by a genuine wish to work, for whatever reasons. My own impression is that women resent being forced out of work or being condemned as 'bad wives and mothers' if they work at least as much as they resented it when they were forced to perform low-paid, inhuman jobs, to have a double burden, or to come under ideological pressure for not working.

### *3.2. Women's movements*

One of the puzzling facts about the new democracies is that women are not keen to use the new freedoms to improve their position. With the exception of the limitation of rights to birth-control, which is mobilising women everywhere whenever there is a threat of the issue of abortion being placed on the legislative agenda, there is no significant self-mobilisation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>) It is seldom added – as it is by the Russian researcher Posadskaya quoted by Waters – that men have always been forced to work, but nobody is concerned about whether they would like to work less or not at all [Waters 1993: 292].

<sup>19</sup>) It has to be added that when the Hungarian government introduced some restrictions on abortion in the early seventies, this event triggered the only civil initiative of women, producing a large number of signatures against the restrictions at a time when there was some genuine risk in participating in this enterprise.

The participation of women in politics has remained insignificant. The ratio of female MPs was around 30 percent in the last decades of the former system. This was an improvement over the first decades due partly to international pressure after the UN took up the issue. The relatively significant presence never meant, though, that the women could give voice to an independent view. Still, the drop in this ratio is not reassuring. After the first free elections the rate of female MPs was 8% in Bulgaria [Panova et al. 1993: 18]; 5% in Croatia and 10% in Slovenia [Drakulic 1993: 124]; 10% in Czechoslovakia [Šiklová 1993: 76]; 9% in Poland [Fuszara 1993: 250]; 7% in Hungary in 1990, and 11% in 1994 and so forth. Their absence at the top levels of decision making is as conspicuous as ever. All this is seen with complete indifference or equanimity by women as well as by men.

The legislation on equal human and political rights was mostly already in place under the old system. The enforcement of these rights is not much better ensured, however, than before, except in cases when there is an elected *ombudsman* (Poland, Hungary) to protect human rights, which also includes the rights of women. Meanwhile the employment rights and the social rights of women have been weakened, as discussed above. Also, former taboos concerning for instance sexual harassment at the workplace have survived, and many new sexist phenomena go unattended.

The most important development is the revival of 'civil society'. There are everywhere beginnings and new initiatives. However, feminist movements are usually weak, with low membership, low public support, and the sympathisers or members come almost exclusively from academia. The majority of women who avail themselves of the new right of association are more likely to join conservative or religious groups. (Pro-life movements also belong to this category and they may be quite strong.)

In other words, the necessity of the consciousness raising of women is hardly felt. The question of the absence of women's liberation movements has recently appeared on the agenda of social science as witnessed by all the writings referred to in this paper. Research is still scarce, and opinions, when gauged, are of course highly contradictory or inconsistent. One of the radical Hungarian journals addressed, for instance, an all-round inquiry in 1994 to some prominent people, among others, on the issue of women's movements ["Körkérdés..." 1994, Hadas 1994]. The answers varied considerably – and this variation is recurring in the other countries. Some invoked the lack of necessity for women's mobilisation arguing that women had already more rights than men [Hernádi 1994]. Women (in this inquiry as in instances already mentioned above) often asserted that they never felt discriminated against, and did not see therefore the need for self-mobilisation. The very difficult situation of women has often been invoked as a reason of non-involvement: under their heavy double or triple load women never had time or energy to think about themselves. A similar argument suggested that after the transition, slow or rapid impoverishment added to the worries of women, so that they became even less interested in politics. This view also seems rather widespread. Elena Bonner, one of the radical democratic leaders in the former USSR visited the USA in 1990. She answered a question concerning the role of women in her country in the following way: "You know, our country is on such a low socio-economic level that at the moment we cannot afford to divide us into 'us women' and 'us men'. We share a common struggle for democracy, a struggle to feed the country" [Todorova 1993: 30].

One of the most widespread explanations is that the totalitarian system destroyed solidarities and infantilised people to such a degree as to render them unable to organise themselves. It is sometimes added that feminism was presented by politics in such a dire light as to turn everybody against it. The anti-feminist arguments advanced by women are noted also by Havelková [1993: 65]. Some researchers (Neményi [1994], myself) think that women living in the totalitarian system had to find fearful the rhetoric of early feminism which claimed, among others, that "the private is political". On the one hand, totalitarianism was about invading every sphere including the private, and women and men had the utmost difficulty in retaining some freedom – which was possible only in the family. On the other hand, the rhetoric of early feminism (domination, oppression, liberation, revolution etc.) was too reminiscent of the Bolshevik rhetoric, even the word 'feminism' was too close to 'communism'.

Whatever the real explanation is, it is significant that while political and other movements have started to proliferate with the new freedoms, women have remained by and large silent. But it is also worth noting that in the most recent years the absence of feminism has become an issue: public discourse may just be emerging now.

It may well be – albeit I heavily dislike this argument – that an old political cliché describes the current situation: it has to get much worse before it starts to be better. Only in this particular circumstance the cliché has to be slightly modified: maybe it has to get much worse for women before they start to fight to make it a bit better. Whether civil society will be strong enough to fight the indifference of politics and the enmity of the market in relation to women is an open question. But as more and more people note, the grass-roots struggle, or in other words a strong civil society is the only hope for emancipation.

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