Women and Gender in the Czech Republic and Cross-National Comparisons

In recent decades focus has increased on the situations of women and degrees of gender equality in the United States, Europe, and other societies. Employment discrimination against women and difficulties in integrating family commitments with employment and career achievement have been – and remain – issues of concern.

In 1991, I was privileged to be one of sixteen United States professors who participated in a Fulbright-Hays seminar in Czechoslovakia. This six-week study tour began in Bratislava and involved travel throughout Slovakia and the Czech lands. We were able to discuss economic, political and social issues with governmental leaders, university faculty and religious leaders, enterprise managers, workers and union leaders, Romany leaders, and many others. My particular research focus on "Women, Work and Family in Czechoslovakia" especially benefited from talks with twenty sources (both women and men) [Raabe 1991]. From these discussions, I more clearly realised the high extent of women's full-time employment during communism and the difficulties women experienced in combining this employment with family responsibilities. While maternity and parental leaves and child-care facilities helped, inadequate services and low levels of domestic work by men made work-family integration problematic for women [Raabe 1995]. Many women spoke of their fatigue, their wish for part-time work and their discontent with past communist practices and full-time employment. As one woman put it, "In the past every woman had the 'right to work' – in at least two jobs!" Another spoke of past full-time employment as oppression, "a form of modern slavery," and a few said that they wanted wages to increase so that women could stay home [Raabe 1991]. Gender inequalities (men's advantages) in employment and wages were acknowledged, however, at the same time, many spoke of women's advantages in being able to take leave and earlier retirement and in *not* having to function in upper-management positions under communist rule [Raabe 1991, 1995].

Building on this 1991 Fulbright-Hays research experience and in the context of all the post-1989 changes (democratisation, the growth of capitalism, and changes in employment and jobs), I wondered to what extent would there be continuities or changes in women's work-family orientations and behaviours, in gender practices, and in national work-family policy supports?

In collaboration with Marie Čermáková of the Institute of Sociology in Prague, a 1995 research project funded by IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board, USA) focused on these questions and included surveys of 459 Czech and Slovak women originally surveyed in 1991, surveys of an additional 500 women, additional in-depth interviews with fifty women, and research reports on social policy trends [Raabe 1996, Čermáková 1996, Maříková 1996]. The following sections delineate some of the findings of this research.

Czech Women's Work, Family and Policy Views – Continuities and Differences

In accord with other research [for example, Čermáková 1995a, 1995b; Havelková 1996; Heitlinger 1995; Šiklová 1993], the 1995 study found that Czech women value family

and employment, and, overall, prioritise family. For example, in response to a question about comparative work-family commitments, 31 per cent of Czech women indicated they value work and family equally but 48 per cent said they "value both work and family, but family is the priority" and 12 per cent strongly endorsed family over work. (As in several other areas of the research results, educational levels differentiated among women: in this case university women gave more emphasis to valuing work as well as family.)

In the 1990s the large majority of Czech women of economically active age have continued to be employed full-time, and the 1995 survey likewise found that 60 per cent were co-providers for their families and 14 per cent were sole providers. At the same time, if their husbands "earned sufficient income for the family," only 21 per cent said they would prefer to remain employed full-time. Instead, 63 per cent said they would work either part-time (45 per cent) or intermittently (18 per cent), and 16 per cent said they would stay at home. Nonetheless, despite these preferences, in terms of their work plans for the next six months, majorities said they would definitely not work part-time (75 per cent) nor "be a housewife" (82 per cent). The *International Social Science Program (ISSP) Family and Gender Survey* [1994] also indicated that Czechs reject women "being a housewife" and, instead, endorse women as well as men being household economic providers, and the Czech majorities expressing these views were much higher than percentages in other European countries and the United States [Raabe 1998].

According to both 1991 and 1995 findings, Czech women have mainly valued employment for financial security and "to aid the family budget," and these financial motivations increased in 1995 in comparison with 1991. This was also true – and even more so – for women in Slovakia. Intrinsic interest in work ("like work") also grew between 1991 and 1995 (See Table 1)

These results are compatible with hypotheses that changes to a market economy from both totalitarian oppression in working life and from comprehensive state subsidies will increase interest in work, on the positive side, but also will increase financial insecurity concerns. The greater financial concerns of Slovak women in comparison with Czech women are congruent with the greater economic difficulties experienced in Slovakia, in contrast with the Czech Republic, during this period [King 1996, Kinzer 1995, Passell 1996, Paukert 1995, Večerník 1995a].

Table 1. Reasons to work? Percentages of women saying "very important" in the Czech and Slovak Republics, 1991 and 1995 (in %)

	Czech Republic		Slovak Republic	
	1991	1995	1991	1995
Financial security	58	74	47*	80*
Aid family budget	48	65	42	74
Like work	39	55	52*	68*
Social	41	49	45	61
Job important	27	28	34*	49*
Use education	22	16	33*	27*
Habitual	15	7	18*	14*
Everyone works	6	10	16*	19*

*) Statistically significant difference in responses by republics.

In response to another question asking about improvement, continuity or deterioration in relation to a variety of conditions, Czech women tended to see *improvements* (scores under 3) in: work becoming more interesting, use of education and skills, earnings, satisfaction with life, and the political and economic development of the country. Conversely, they indicated some *deterioration* (scores over 3.5) in relation to job security, availability of jobs, and the quality and availability of nurseries (See Table 2.) Again, Slovak women were more negative in their assessments, and the evaluations of women in both countries seem to parallel the nature of the economic transformations and societal situations in each country in 1995.

Table 2. Czech and Slovak women's assessments of improvement, continuity or deterioration between 1991 and 1995 (Means)
(1 = Significant improvement; 2 = Partial improvement; 3 = No change; 4 = Partial deterioration; 5 = Significant deterioration)

	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic
Work demands	3.42	3.41
Hours at work	3.31	3.34
Interesting work	2.71	2.83
Job security	3.52	3.85*
Availability of jobs	3.62	4.14*
Education and skill usage	2.79	3.19*
Earnings	2.83	3.22*
Opportunities to change employer	3.18	3.80*
Leisure opportunities	3.38	3.52
Time for children and family	3.22	3.27
Time for shopping	3.08	3.14
Holiday and travel opportunities	3.02	3.78*
Satisfaction with own life	2.96	3.37*
Own health	3.31	3.4
Availability of services for households	3.16	3.42*
Health care for children	3.02	3.45*
Quality and availability of nurseries	3.7	4.12*
Quality and availability of kindergartens	3.32	3.8*
Political and economic development of country	2.97	4.26*

*) Statistically significant difference in responses between republics.

Although the data are not shown in Table 2, as may be expected with the changes to a market economy and the modernisation of industries and jobs in the Czech Republic, more educated Czech women were more affirmative than others about the situation in 1995 (in terms of interesting work, job security, availability of jobs, education and skill usage, earnings, opportunities to change employer, holiday and travel opportunities, life and health satisfaction, and political and economic development, and the adequacy of social policies – discussed below and in Table 3).

While significant reductions in social policies occurred in other post-communist countries (for example, reductions in maternity leaves and child care in East Germany [Adler and Brayfield 1996]), there have been more social policy continuities and more moderated reductions in the Czech Republic and Slovakia [Kvapilová 1993; Orenstein 1995; Večerník 1995a, 1995b; *IREX Social...* 1995-1996]. In the Czech Republic, maternity/parental benefits were expanded, and although the number of nurseries declined, this

was congruent with the declining birth rate and the development of other child-care options. Increases in kindergarten fees have been moderate, and although a move to more targeted social assistance in children's allowances provides graduated subsidies to correspond to need, it has only excluded the top five per cent of families from coverage. A variety of other subsidies (such as parental allowance, housing and transportation) similarly were continued and adjusted for inflation. At the time of the 1995 survey, Slovakia also had maintained comprehensive social policies through social insurance, state allowances and social assistance. However, one major problem was the government's non-adjustment of the minimum living standard, which is the base for many subsidy calculations, to keep up with inflation. This, in effect, led to a decline in some subsidies.

Czechs have continued to endorse a variety of state social policy supports [Večerník 1995b, Raabe 1998], and the views of women in the 1995 survey supported this assessment (see Table 3).

Table 3. Czech and Slovak women's endorsements of social policies (Means) (1 = strongest support)

	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic
A. Women should receive allowance for bringing up children and homemaking (response range: 1-3)	1.55	1.47*
B. The government should provide jobs for women (response range: 1-3)	1.56	1.31***
C. The state should help all families (response range: 1-3)	1.91	1.81***
D. The state should help working mothers with young children (response range: 1-3)	1.65	1.54**
E. The state should give maternity allowance to mothers (response range: 1-4)		
– with children under 1 year	1.19	1.14
– with children under 3 years	1.36	1.35
F. The state should subsidise (response range: 1 = fully; 2 & 3 = partially;4 = not at all)		
– nurseries for children under 3	2.35	2.11***
– kindergartens	2.18	2.01***
– elementary school	1.62	1.60
– high school	1.86	1.72*
– universities	2.22	1.96***
– housing	2.35	2.08***
G. The state should support single mothers with small children (response range: 1-3)	1.27	1.38**
H. Social policies today in comparison with before 1989 (1 = are better; 2 = about the same; 3 = insufficient)	2.50	2.81***

*) Response difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level
**) Response difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level
***) Response difference is statistically significant at the 0.001 level

As Table 3 delineates, in 1995 both Czech and Slovak women strongly supported a variety of "family-friendly" state policies with maternity allowances for mothers of a child under 1 year receiving the strongest affirmation. On scales of 1-3 or 1-4 (with 1 indicating the strongest policy support), Czech women were on the endorsement side (below 2) on eight of thirteen policies and Slovak women on ten of the thirteen. While women in

both countries were similar in endorsing family-supportive state subsidies, Slovak women were more affirmative on all policies except one (state support for single mothers with young children) where Czech women's endorsement was higher. Czech women were more likely to advocate more co-financing by individuals together with partial or income-adjusted state subsidies rather than universal ones (see F. on Table 3). In these views, Czech and Slovak women seemed to be in accord with their respective governmental practices: in the context of continuing social policy supports in both countries, there has been more of a shift to more targeted assistance and less universal benefits in the Czech Republic [Orenstein 1995; Raabe 1998; Večerník 1995a, 1995b].

Gender

As seen above, despite interests in reduced hours of work, Czech women predominantly continue to be employed full-time (aside of the times on maternity and parental leaves), strongly endorse being an economic provider, and concomitantly, reject being a dependent 'housewife'. This strikingly contrasts with the experiences of women in many Western European nations and the United States where high proportions either work part-time or leave the labour force when children are young, and it also contrasts with greater endorsement of 'being a housewife' in some other post-communist countries such as Poland and Hungary [Raabe 1998].

At the same time, as elsewhere, family and work activities have been gender differentiated, with most Czech women subordinating employment and careers to family commitment, while men have prioritised their jobs and have had limited domestic responsibilities. However, in contrast with attitudinal and policy emphases on more gender symmetry in work and family roles in many other advanced industrial countries, Czechs overall continue to endorse gender differentiation [Čermáková 1995b, Crompton 1997, Crompton and Harris 1997, Raabe 1998]. For example, in response to a 1994 ISSP Survey item (where scores ranged from 1, "strongly agree" to 5, "strongly disagree"): "A man's job is to earn money, a women's job is to look after the home and family", among ten countries, Czechs, joined Poles and Hungarians on the 'agreeing' side, while seven other countries were more in disagreement.

(Average scores were: 2.3 Poland; 2.31 Hungary; 2.55 Czech Republic; 3.15 West Germany; 3.43 Britain; 3.54 USA; 3.6 Netherlands; 3.82 Norway; 3.9 Sweden; 3.95 East Germany.)

Yet, as already noted, along with other research, the 1995 findings affirm the interests of Czech women in employment and economic independence. As Table 4 delineates, majorities – and increasingly so in 1995 in comparison with 1991 – opposed subordinating their employment and income interests to men (see Table 4).

In other gender findings, while some Czech women in 1995 said that men are more advantaged in opportunities to succeed (51 per cent), 48 per cent said that chances are "about equal." In terms of family decision-making, in 1995 the majority of Czech women reported joint decision-making (69 per cent) or women's control (25 per cent). However, 58 per cent reported that husbands were not helpful with family responsibilities – either because they were too busy at work (27 per cent) or because they considered them a woman's responsibility (31 per cent). Nonetheless, despite full-time work and most of the '2nd shift', 53 per cent of Czech women said that they were able to manage work-and-family satisfactorily, and only 4 per cent reported great difficulties in work-family management.

All of the above seem to point to an interesting amalgam of Czech women's views on gender equality and differentiation: Czech women value their employment and economic independence, recognise men's employment and career advantages in the economy and government but also see opportunities for women; they appreciate and expect continued social policy supports; assume, to date, gendered responsibilities for family care and domestic work, and, at the same time, indicate pride in their family roles and efficacy in work-family integration. In terms of the latter, Czech women's assertiveness and sense of efficacy were expressed in the in-depth interviews in 1995 where several women stated that, in comparison with Western women, they "are more hard-working, can organise their lives, are independent of their husbands, can take care of their families themselves, do not moan, do not constantly declare frustration and depression" [*IREX Interviews...* 1995].

Table 4. Czech and Slovak women's gender attitudes – comparisons 1991 and 1995** (Means, by Republic). (Scale: 1 = Agree,..., 3 = Disagree)

	Czech Republic		Slovak Republic		
	1991	1995	1991	1995	Change*
1. Women should give up their jobs for men for a certain period of time (Differences by republic and education: more disagreement by Czech women and by more educated women in both republics)	2.62	2.81	2.47	2.68	CR, SR
2. Women should stay home and support the careers of their husbands, this is best for the entire family (Education effects: those with more education disagree in both republics)	2.4	2.5	2.2	2.5	SR
3. Men should have better positions at work and make more money because they have to provide for their families (Differences by republic and by education: 1995, 79% CR, 55% SR university graduates disagree)	2.04	2.32	1.64	2.02	CR, SR
4. Women should have their income independent of parents and spouse	1.56	1.49	1.66	1.45	CR, SR

*) Statistically significant change, 1991-1995.

Conclusion

As delineated in the sections above, in the 1990s Czech women increasingly value employment intrinsically and, especially, for financial reasons, At the same time, they highly value their families and family involvement and their ability to combine employment and family roles. Despite preferences for reduced work time, they have continued to be employed on a full-time basis. They have benefited from supportive state family social policies – and endorse and expect the continuation of many of these policies (even if in modified forms). While indicating concerns and criticisms about some aspects of the post-communist transformation, they (overall and particularly those with more education) are fairly positive in their assessments of the changes. Although recognising men's past and current advantages in careers and political life, they tend to deny the attribution of 'patriarchy', and instead cite Czech women's independence and their advantages in family life and in combining 'work and family'. In these ways they seem to assert a kind of

'comparable worth' model of gender equality: activities and accomplishments are gender differentiated but, in the end, assessed as equal [Raabe 1998].

In addition to the above, what are some other insights for an American from these Czech findings and from experiences in the Czech Republic? In contrast with the seeming devaluation of family involvement and 'overvaluing' of work and careers by many American men and women [for example, Hochschild 1989, 1997], Czech women strongly affirm the value of family life, of women's family involvements and contributions, and of integrating family and employment. And similarly, from their long-standing experiences in full-time employment, their voices caution against valuing full-time employment and careers as the path to life achievement and happiness.

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