

“Eastern European Women” Winners or Losers in Post-Communist Transitions?

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Introduction

After the collapse of the ‘communist’ regimes across Eastern Europe in 1989 the key question of interest to gender equality analysts was what impact a transition to democracy and market economy would have on the situation of women in the various spheres of social life. The transition to democracy also created an opportunity for Eastern European women to establish new groups and to mobilise other individuals with similar policy preferences to pressure the political establishment to take action on different gender issues. Accordingly, extensive literature on women’s movements and the situation of women in Eastern Europe began to develop during the 1990s. The main purpose of this article is to discuss shortcomings of existing work on Eastern European women’s movements and how gender policy has developed. I will point to some logical and methodological problems of existing work, which have presented an obstacle for creating cumulative knowledge. I hope to be able to show that, while a considerable amount of research has been done on this topic, few systematic studies have been carried out so far. This is particularly true when it comes to research focusing on organised attempts of women’s movements to target political elites in order to advance various issues concerning gender policy. It is also true with regard to research that identifies different patterns of forming gender policy across the region. In the first part of the article, I will discuss the shortcomings of previous research that focuses on women’s situation after the downfall of the communist systems. I will question the broadly representative picture of the previous research which identifies

women as victims of the recent transformation processes. In the second part of the article, I proceed to discuss the shortcomings of the existing studies on women's movements in post-communist countries. Among other things, I argue that the theoretical framework of contemporary research on women's movements remains insufficient and that several myths about the women's movements, which have been created by the contemporary research, have to be questioned and challenged.

The Portrayal of Women in Eastern Europe as Victims of the Recent Transition Processes

16 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin wall. Today we are able to conclude that the transition processes exhibit some similarities across the region. The ideas of economic transition from a planned economy to a market economy have been adopted in all transition countries. All countries have experienced some changes in public enterprises and in the welfare systems. They have also experienced political change with greater access to democratic ideas and greater freedom of organisation. The countries have also seen the revival of suppressed national, cultural and religious identities. While the impact of these transitional processes has been different across the region, they constitute a common background against which different regimes are emerging. Can we draw any general conclusions about the women's relationship to the state and their families under the new Eastern European regimes? As the status of women in the post-communist countries has been, and continues to be, varied and contradictory, we can only provide some provisional answers to such a difficult question. We can, however, observe that the picture that emerges from the growing literature on the subject is hardly optimistic. Empirical studies published in the West about the situation of women in the former Eastern block have predominantly focused on the extremely negative effects of post-communist reforms on women (e.g. Einhorn 1993; Funk & Muller 1993; Watson 1993; Moghadam 1995; Gal & Kligman 2000; LaFont 2001). In many studies, this pessimism is illustrated with some of the worst-case scenarios and unfortunately, it has been generalised to all women in Eastern Europe. By doing so, scholars have created the category victimised "Eastern European women". This pessimism will be illustrated with a few quotes from the major works published on the topic.

According to Rueschmeyer, women are 'the losers in the recent transformations', because they have lost socially and economically in post-communist societies (Rueschmeyer 1994:226). Einhorn argues that 'despite clear empow-

ements in the civil and political rights associated with democratic citizenship, in the short run at least, women in East Central Europe stand to lose economic, social welfare and reproductive rights' (Einhorn 1993:1). Moghadam claims that Eastern and Central European democracies suffer the 'resurgence of patriarchal discourses' and have a 'male face' (Moghadam 1995: 348). She compares the democratic revolutions of Eastern and Central Europe with the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, arguing that, from a feminist point of view, the immediate outcome of both revolutions was 'patriarchal rather than emancipatory' (Moghadam 1995:352). According to Lafont, Eastern European women experience 'wide-spread gender discrimination in the labour market' (LaFont 2001:214). She argues that the transition to democracy 'rather than diminishing gender discrimination, has widened the gender gap through a decline in women's political representation and an increase in women's unemployment and under-employment' (LaFont 2001:203).

It seems as if the predominant effort and mission of these scholars have been to document how a majority of Eastern European women have been negatively affected by the post-communist transformation due to the rescinding of former socialist rights to political representation, employment, public services and different forms of social assistance. In my opinion, this widespread assumption may be criticised in at least two respects. First, it is important to acknowledge that while the political and economic transition processes had some negative consequences for women, a vast majority of the empirical studies published since 1989 reinforces the popular impression that the post-communist transition is an entirely coherent process that is necessarily disadvantageous to women. Empirical work and theories about post-communist countries are, unfortunately, conditioned by universal assumptions and categories, which may exclude from the analyses the full range of aspects that may strengthen or impair women's position in the different spheres of social life. Portraying all Eastern European women as victims of the recent transition processes imply that women somehow constitute a socially homogenous group which has been identified prior to the analysis. It is certainly clear that as social scientists we have to find some way of simplifying the subject of our analysis in order to have any chance of understanding the complex social and political reality. However, to assume that the category 'Eastern European women' is internally coherent regardless of nationality, ethnicity, class or age leads to over-simplification, which creates and perpetuates myths about the situation of women in different Eastern European countries instead of reflecting a very diverse and complex reality.

Secondly, the empirical evidence for the various pessimistic statements is scarce and mostly based on secondary empirical sources. With their mostly impressionistic and anecdotal style of interpreting the material, the scholars create the impression that they know more than they actually do. In this article, I argue that the picture of Eastern European women as victims of the recent transition processes is much exaggerated, and that the status of women in the post-communist countries has been, and continues to be, varied and full of contradictions. I will try to substantiate this claim by addressing the question whether or not there is enough empirical evidence to claim that gender inequality in the labour market increased after the transition to democracy and market economy in Eastern Europe and whether there is enough evidence to argue that women lost the bulk of their social rights and assumed a more traditional role than during the communist era. Women's position in the labour market, their social rights and their position in the political arena are the areas most commonly used in contemporary research on women's situation in post-communist societies to illustrate women's loss.

Changes in the Economy

With regard to drawing conclusions about changes in gender policy in general and about changes in women's position in the labour market in post-communist countries since 1989, it is important to acknowledge that much more research still needs to be done to cover all institutional changes and to identify new diverging patterns between the countries. The following overview, therefore, should be regarded as a prediction of some identifiable patterns that are emerging in the region, rather than as an attempt to draw any final conclusions.

Even though more data analysis is required to address gender asymmetry in labour markets across the region, we are now able to draw certain conclusions about how women's position in the labour market has been affected by the transition to a market economy. The first general conclusion from the available data provided by international organisations (e.g. the ILO, the World Bank and the UN) is that both men and women entered the transition process unprepared for the loss of job security and the massive lay-offs. It also seems that the situation of men and women at the onset of the transition process reflected the past system in which women, in most cases, played the role of second income earners who were employed in less strategic sectors within the industrialisation model led by heavy industries. Women's high rate of full-time

employment and especially the structure of employment and their level and profile of education, however, could be viewed as factors which would facilitate women's adjustment to a new situation in the labour market (the World Bank 2002). The women's high rate of employment in the service sector could also be viewed as an advantage. Many parts of the service sector experienced a dynamic growth under market conditions (e.g. retail trade, banking, insurance) thereby providing new job opportunities for women as opposed to men who dominated in heavy industry where employment declined with the reduction of output. Apart from the positive structural conditions which may strengthen women's position in the labour market, there is also some evidence that labour market policies, especially in the first phase of the transition process, reflected the traditional model of men as breadwinners. For example, in some countries, women were encouraged to leave the labour market through early retirement policies and more attractive programs for parental leave (Women 2000). While they were at home, women were expected to have more children, especially in countries which had declining fertility rates prior to 1989. There were also arguments that women should be liberated from their 'forced' participation in the labour market under communism and retreat to domesticity. Those kinds of arguments were most often advocated by the extreme right-wing political parties and supported by fundamentalist wings of organised religion¹.

Considering the presence of nationalist and conservative political forces, many scholars assumed that in these new democratic systems women would be more likely to become unemployed and that women's participation in the labour force would decline or had already declined (e.g. Einhorn 1993; Funk & Mueller 1993; Rueschmeyer 1994; LaFont 2001). In the perhaps most widely read and cited book on women's situation in post-communist countries Barbara Einhorn states: 'Paid employment has been the norm for women in East Central Europe for the past forty years. Now they are the first to be dismissed' (Einhorn 1993:113). I already mentioned that under communism, the women in the region had notably higher rates of participation in the paid labour force. Women also had a high level of education which is an important capital in the transforming economy. What is the impact of the transitions on the position of women in the labour market? Has gender inequality in the labour market increased after the collapse of the communist system as several researchers have claimed?

¹ For more information on the conservative political environment during the first years of the transition please see Shadow Reports to the CEDAW, submitted by Women's Nongovernmental Organizations in different Eastern European countries, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw>

Gender Differences in the Labour Market

According to several sources, the women's crude rates of activity show a decline in many countries of the region after the transition to a market economy. However, men's rate of participation in the labour force also decreased, although proportionally slightly less. In 1997 there were 26 million fewer jobs in the 27 countries in the region compared with 1988. Almost 14 million women lost their jobs (UNICEF 1999:27). Despite this drop in the women's employment rates, the gender gap in the participation in the labour force does not appear to show a great shift with the emergence of the market economy across the region. The proportion of women among the employed still remains in the range of 40-50 percent across the region (UNICEF 1999; UNECE 2002). This is not surprising (although the expectations of a number of scholars have pointed in a different direction) considering the fall in average real wages which has generated greater efforts to maintain two-income households and the high levels of education among women. Clearly, the model of men as breadwinners could not provide a framework for labour market policies in transition countries. It seems that few women could afford to leave the labour market for financial reasons. At the same time, for similar reasons as elsewhere, younger and well-educated generations of women in transitional countries do not seem to view being a housewife as a career model. This might be because the younger generations of Eastern European women want independence and financial security from paid work and they also want the satisfaction and social position which come with a professional career rather than embracing the traditional role of a housewife. The fact that women did not withdraw from the labour market in large numbers is also confirmed in the study conducted by Eva Fodor and Tanja van der Lipe (1998). They examined the question of whether women are indeed "the losers" in the transformation of Eastern Europe since 1989. They focused solely on issues concerning participation in the labour force and concluded that women generally do not appear to have suffered major setbacks with regard to their financial position compared to men in the first five years after the collapse of state socialism. According to the results from that study, women have managed to retain, though probably not improve, their occupational status and power since 1989. The authors thus conclude that women did not become full-time housewives in large numbers, as predicted by various other researchers (Fodor & van der Lipe 1998:141).

In addition, according to data from the ILO, female unemployment rates in the first half of the 1990s were not uniformly higher than male unemployment rates across the region; in fact there was no systematic pattern of unemployment by gender in the post-communist countries. Male and female unemployment rates were roughly equal in four countries (Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, and the Slovak Republic); women's unemployment rates exceeded those of men in two countries (Poland and the Czech Republic); and male rates of unemployment were higher in two countries (Hungary and Slovenia) (the ILO 1998:473-80). In the second half of the 1990s, the pattern of unemployment does, therefore, not indicate consistently higher unemployment rates for women. The review in the Economic Survey of Europe, 1999 showed that in 1997, only 5 of 11 transitional countries reported higher unemployment rates among women (UNECE 1999). Unemployment rates among women were lower than among men in Hungary, Latvia, the Russian Federation and Slovenia but higher in the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania. This is confirmed by recent data from the Economic Survey of Europe (UNECE 2002). In 2001, unemployment among women was higher in 4 of 10 countries (the Czech Republic, Poland, Estonia and Slovenia), and only in the first two was the difference substantial. The decline in the ratio of female to male unemployment in the period between 1998 and 2001 also indicates a relative improvement in the women's situation in the labour market. There is also some evidence that during between 2000 and 2002 men were more affected by employment cuts in all countries except Armenia, Slovakia and Slovenia. More research is needed to explain these trends.

Apart from women's participation in the work force, wages are another important indicator of women's financial well-being. Women's income can influence their status and decision-making power within the family, as well as their choices about working and fertility. Several studies suggest that the gender gap with regard to salaries has become considerably smaller in a majority of the Central European countries (e.g. the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, and Hungary) (Brainerd 1998:148-149; UNICEF 1999:33-35). On the other hand, women's salaries have decreased dramatically in Russia and Ukraine. The narrowing gender gap with regard to salaries in the majority of the Central European countries, however, is one of the facts that are almost never mentioned by the contemporary research on women's situation in Eastern Europe.

There are, nevertheless, also negative sides to women's position in the labour market in post-communist countries that have to be emphasised. Docu-

mented discrimination in the labour market, occupational segregation, and lower wages are certainly areas in which women are at a disadvantage (Women 2000; World Bank 2002) but these negative aspects already existed within the communist system, although they operated along different institutional lines. Discrimination of women today exists in the private sector in particular, where employers favour young women and offer short-term contracts, or temporary work to avoid any costs, which might arise from maternity and childcare. For example, women are often asked for medical documents to prove that they are not pregnant before signing a contract. Especially older women, and women with small children, have difficulties finding a job in the private sector. The main reasons for discriminatory hiring practices are also known from the Western countries. Women are not equally available to work under the pressure and longer hours required by many companies in the private sector. There is also a perception that women are more expensive workers (Fong 1996). The discrimination against women in the labour market, however, has become increasingly recognised by Eastern European governments as a problem that must be addressed through legislation and different policy solutions. So far, anti-discriminatory legislation was introduced mostly in countries, which had applied for membership in the European Union (Women 2000). Additional studies will determine how these laws are actually implemented.

Conclusion

In summary, the available data allows for the following general conclusion: The market economy certainly did not reduce gender inequality, which nevertheless has not increased as much as some scholars expected. Women's participation in the labour force does not appear to change much with the emergence of the market economy across the region. In addition, female unemployment rates were not uniformly higher than male unemployment rates during the 1990s. It is, however, important to underline the substantive differences in the situation of women in different countries and sub-regions. The experiences of market reform in post-communist countries have been diverse, which makes generalisations difficult. As is frequently pointed out in various reports, women's position in the labour market is certainly more insecure and it is even more precarious for women living in countries and sub-regions affected by political instability and financial crisis, war and/or military conflicts, as has been the case for many countries in south-eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (e.g. UNICEF 1999, the World Bank 2002). Regarding the different trends

in women's employment and unemployment across the region, we may assume that the cases in which women actually did withdraw from the paid labour force are more a result of economic reconstruction and involuntary unemployment than of conservative pressure on women to retreat into domesticity.

Women and Family Policies

What is the impact of the transition on family and social policies in post-communist countries? As I have mentioned earlier, the literature claims that there is an ideological pressure on women to take on traditional family roles. Is there really enough evidence to argue that women now choose to become housewives more often than during the communist era and that they have lost a majority of their social rights? Balancing work and family responsibilities is a major challenge for most women. Several scholars have acknowledged that social policies reflect assumptions about gender relations within households and that they have an impact on these relationships (e.g. Lewis 1992; Sainsbury 1996). Systems of family support and benefits may treat men and women as individuals or as members of households. Whether benefits are paid to men or to women affect power relationships within the marriage as well as spending patterns while, for example, housing policies may enable or discourage separation and women's ability to escape violent partners. Under communism benefits and taxation were, in most cases, attached to women's own employment rather than treating wives as their husbands' dependants (Ferge 1998). For a long time, the communist countries of Eastern Europe were committed, at least nominally, to gender equality in the labour market. Government policies such as relatively high minimum wages, generous maternity leave and child care benefits encouraged women to work, and the number of women participating in the labour force was high compared to other countries².

² It is important to acknowledge that the former communist welfare regimes of Eastern Europe may, at first sight, seem similar to the dual breadwinner families of the Nordic countries. Both supported women as workers and both provided relatively high levels of support for childcare, family benefits and parental leave and had high public expenditure on health and education services that supported family work. However, at the same time in the communist welfare regimes there were counterbalancing factors, which did not allow women's financial independence in the same sense as in the Nordic countries. For example, housing access under communist regimes was a serious constraint to divorce and separation. The average incomes were too low to afford independent housing, and too low for single mothers to escape poverty. Neither did the conservative attitudes that celebrate traditional marriage encourage women to live independently in economical or psychical sense.

The changing landscape of family policies

The seemingly strong network of family support was particularly vulnerable to the transitional factors because it was financed and operated by the state and because many of the benefits and services were delivered through the workplace. Accordingly, the transition from communism provided a radically new context for these types of programmes. The reduced GDP, public revenue and market pressures on employers made these provisions hard to sustain. The percentage of declining GDPs spent on family allowances, maternity and childcare and pre-primary education has increased in the majority of post-communist countries (Deacon 1997; UNICEF 1999). It is, nonetheless, important to underline that despite the fact that the value of various benefits has eroded considerably during the transition there is little evidence that new social and family policies are designed to push women into traditional roles. After the transition to democracy most countries continue to offer various family support programs, although, in most cases, the benefits have been reduced (Deacon 1997; UNICEF 1999). Maternity entitlements have remained relatively untouched and are still generous by international standards (Rostgaard 2004). In addition, over the last few years, some countries have extended the right of parental leave³. It is also important to point out that during the 1990s several countries (e.g. Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia) added stipulations in their family laws that strongly encourage sharing the responsibilities of raising children. For example, legal maternity leave has been extended to men as well as to women and is now referred to as “parental leave” (Women 2000, UNESCO 2003, Sloat 2004). The fact that maternity/parental entitlements have remained relatively untouched in the region since the transition began indicates that governments across the region recognise the importance of this type of family support.

Under communism different types of benefits and taxation were linked to women’s employment rather than to their status as spouses. A review of existing tax arrangements in the region suggests that current tax systems are friendly to women’s participation in the labour force and tend to offer concessions to families with children (Spehar 1999). Taxation and

³ As with maternity leave, extended parental leave can have both positive and negative effects on women. The leave may provide an effective bridge between the home and the workplace, but not without consequences for career and earnings. The international data show that it is predominantly women who take advantage of parental leave, and there are differences among the women who do. Women with good employment opportunities are less likely to take the full parental leave because the extended absence disrupts their career development.

benefit systems are still based on individuals rather than on breadwinner/dependant relationships while property rights in marriage and divorce are based on equal common ownership and appear to be perceived as fair⁴. For families with pre-school children, adequate, accessible and affordable childcare is crucial for balancing employment and household responsibilities. Without childcare, one of the parents - typically the woman - has to stay at home for a few years, which affects not only the immediate household income, but also the woman's lifelong career development and earnings. Under communism, childcare was widely available and widely used, although there was more variation between countries than is usually presumed. In 1989, kindergarten enrolment rates ranged from 86 percent in Hungary, to 49 percent in Poland and 23 percent in FR Yugoslavia (UNICEF 1999:21-2). There were also cross-national differences regarding enrolment rates in nurseries (children up to age 2). In 1989 the highest rate of enrolment in nurseries was 42 percent in Latvia and the lowest in Poland where the corresponding number was 9 percent.

What changes in nursery and kindergarten enrolment rates may be observed in the first ten years of the transition period? Regarding the enrolment rates in nurseries it is important to acknowledge that they have declined throughout the region, most notably in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Several factors influenced this outcome. During the transition, programmes for parental leave were generally made more attractive in several countries and there is, for example, some evidence of a shift from nursery to parental care in the region (UNICEF 1999:54). Enrolment rates in kindergartens seem to have been much less affected. Kindergarten enrolments are still high compared to international rates and, according to data from UNICEF, rates stabilised or improved in most Central European countries in 1996-1997 (UNICEF 1999:55). Some countries in the region, however, show a substantial decline in enrolment in pre-schools, especially in Central Asia (UNICEF 1999:55).

Women's reproductive rights in post-communist countries certainly constitute an area that different scholars have used very frequently to illustrate a loss for the Eastern European women after the fall of the communist system. Under communism abortion was, on the whole, available through-

⁴ Different studies show that the personal income tax systems in which the tax unit is the individual rather than the household tend to promote female employment, especially if it allows for the spouses pooling their income for tax purposes. In contrast, tax systems based on family units, pooling, or allowances for low-income spouses create incentives for the lower income earner in the household - most often women - to take other than full-time work or withdraw from the labour market. (Sainsbury 1996)

out Eastern Europe. During the first few years of the transition when the nationalists came to power in a majority of the countries, programmes were launched to increase birth rates and to fight abortion. Restrictions have been discussed in e.g. Russia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia. Women's reproductive rights are, nevertheless, sustained; abortion remains legal in all countries except in Poland (UNICEF 1999: Women 2000). Bearing this fact in mind it is very surprising that some scholars still argue that women in post-communist countries have lost ground regarding their reproductive rights (e.g. Lafont 2001:217).

The previous discussion indicates that despite the impression that the ideological climate is pushing women into traditional relationships, there is little evidence that the new social policies are designed to do so. Despite fears, the ideological base has not changed in the direction of a conservative welfare state with a strong commitment to the preservation of the traditional family where social insurance typically excludes non-working wives, and family benefits encourage motherhood⁵. A variety of measures, maternity and parental leaves and kindergarten services, still exist in the region to help to alleviate the conflict between work and family. In short, what we have been able to observe in the area of family policies so far is the modification of communist policies without any drastic shift in the direction of the policy⁶. We may, nonetheless, still identify some shifts in social policy towards the liberal welfare state model dominated by means-tested assistance, modest universal transfers or modest social insurance plans. Over the course of the transition, several countries have moved from universal cash benefits to family allowances targeted at low-income households (Deacon 1998; UNICEF 1999). This shift may actually leave many women in a less autonomous position. Several studies, including

⁵ Constitutional laws in the majority of Eastern European countries contain an explicit provision prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender (see SEELINE 2002 and ENAWA 2003 country reports). At the same time, however, because of the shared communist heritage, many countries still have constitutional legislative provisions that aim to protect motherhood (e.g. shorter working hours, longer maternity leaves, restrictions on working at nights) (For more detailed information, please see report Women 2000). Such "protectionist" legislation must be carefully analysed, as it might, in many cases, result in the discrimination against women. For instance, guaranteeing a shorter working week for mothers can result in employers' refusing to hire women of childbearing age. In other cases, however, such laws may facilitate a more feasible combination of work and family responsibilities for women. However, the prime concern here, from the gender equality aspect, is the transition from maternity provision to parental provision.

⁶ In the 1996 report, The World Bank noted that while economic, legal and political reform had taken place in many countries to varying extents, shifts in social policy had been less evident everywhere and had lagged behind reform in other areas. Ulrike Götting (1998), in her study of Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic she came to similar conclusion and drew attention to institutional continuity in social policy.

those focusing on child poverty, show a trend toward a feminisation of poverty (World Bank 2000; UNICEF 1999). The most vulnerable to poverty are single mothers, large families and older women living alone. These trends may already be found elsewhere in the world. There are, however, huge differences in the women's situation between different post-communist countries and regions. Women living in countries in which there is political and economic instability, such as in many countries in south-eastern Europe i.e. Albania, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro) and the former Soviet Union (i.e. Caucasus, Russia, Ukraine) are most affected by poverty (Braithwaite and Grootaert 1998, World Bank 2005). In these countries, many families were displaced and have lost their homes and jobs.

Conclusion

In summary, we may conclude that the transition has had an effect on a number of features of gender relations and the system of social policies that support it. It is, however, also important to acknowledge the fact that women in different Eastern European countries did not lose a majority of their social rights as several researchers have claimed or implied. The policy diversification in the transition period, however, shows a much more varied pattern today and central European countries have sustained support at much higher levels than the rest of the region. We may also question the assumptions that women are returning to the 'traditional role for women' in society and that they are becoming more attached to their homes than during the communist era. One indicator, beside the fact that women in general did not withdraw from the labour market in large numbers, is the fact that the family in the most post-communist countries is changing in ways similar to families in all other developed countries. The number of marriages and births is declining, while the number of non-traditional families, single mothers and cohabitation is increasing (UNICEF 1999; UN 2000). The problem whether women in general are becoming more financially dependent on their family relations than during the communist times, however, is difficult to assess because there is no comparable pre-transition data.

It is still difficult to predict what kind of welfare systems are likely to emerge over the next few years and how women's financial independence from their family relationships will be affected. Neither the financial nor the welfare structures have currently been permanently established in the region. It is, nevertheless, realistic to expect more diversity with regard to the developments across the region in the future. Different welfare issues such as social

transformation aimed at redistributing resources and social value more equally between men and women including undermining the public/private gender segregations which marginalise women in the world of politics and economic production, is certainly an important area for scholars to analyse in the future.

Contemporary Research on Women's Movements

Concerning the theoretical and empirical work on Eastern European women's movements we may observe tendencies similar to the studies on the women's situation. These studies have prevented the systematic gathering of empirical and theoretical knowledge and have perpetuated various myths regarding the women's movements in post-communist countries. Scholars have frequently interpreted as anti-feminist the anti-political conviction of Eastern European women's organising, their avoidance of parliamentary politics and the formation of different women's organisations. The problem with those and similar assumptions is that they are, in most cases, predominantly based on personal, often very selective, observations rather than on the systematic gathering of empirical facts.

Eastern European women and anti-feminism

In the book 'Women and Democracy' Jane Jaquette and Sharon Wolchik point out 'the sharp rejection of Western feminism' by the Eastern European women (1998:14). Among other things, the authors state that 'Central and Eastern European women seem to be questioning the core feminist tenet that women's confinement to the private sphere is oppressive while women's public involvement in the economy and the polity is liberating' (Jaquette and Wolchik 1998:13). Two central aspects of this statement can be questioned with regard to the Eastern European women's conservatism and their rejection of fundamental 'western feminist values'. First, what is the authors' definition of 'Central and Eastern European women'? Do they refer to women as an entire Eastern European population, to feminist scholars, feminist activists or something else? Second, on which empirical facts are these assumptions based? As far as I am informed there is no comparable data for all Eastern European countries that measures attitudes towards feminism or towards women's position in the public or private spheres. We may, of course, draw certain conclusions by looking at different national or international surveys in which a certain amount of conser-

vatism in the attitudes of the Eastern European population may be observed⁷. In order to draw valid conclusions from these surveys, it is important to keep two the following two aspects in mind. First, if we compare the attitudes towards equality in the home and the workplace in different areas of Eastern Europe, we will find that there is no universal "Eastern European" pattern⁸. Second, from a wider international perspective we may conclude that the Eastern European population is not more conservative than, for example, the population of Germany, Italy or Spain⁹. For a long time, theories of socialisation have emphasised the importance of either egalitarian or traditional attitudes towards women in the private and public spheres. The Nordic countries are the only region in the world where we can observe a pattern of liberal-egalitarian attitudes towards the role of women in society. In Scandinavia, a long tradition of government intervention to promote social equality may have made the public more receptive to

⁷ See, for example, International Social Survey Programme; (ISSP *family* 1994), (ISSP *religion* 1998) and (World Value Survey 1991-3; 1995-7). The 1995-1997 wave of the World Value Survey included the item that asked respondents to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement: 'On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do'. The data revealed a striking regional contrast: in every Western European country a large majority of respondents rejected the belief the men are better political leaders. In contrast, a majority of respondents in every Eastern European country believe that men make better leaders than women.

⁸ For example, the ISSP measures family and changing gender roles with asking respondents how far they agreed or disagreed (on a 5-point scale) with the following statement: *A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family*. A comparison of responses shows that there are substantial cross-national differences, which span from 66% agreeing with the statement in Bulgaria to 30% agreeing with the same statement in Slovenia.

⁹ The attitudes towards a legal abortion show that the Eastern European countries are more liberal than many Western European countries. 89 percent of Russians, 82 percent of Bulgarians, 75 percent of Hungarians, 74 percent of Slovenians, 49 percent of Poles agrees with the following statement: '*A pregnant woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion for any reason whatsoever, if she chooses not to have a baby*'. The percentage of respondents who agree with the above statement in Western world is following: Germany 59 percent, Great Britain 52 percent, United States 45 percent, Italy 42 percent, Ireland 27 percent (ISSP 1994). Regarding the attitudes towards women's movements we can see a stronger approval of women's movements in Eastern Europe than in the West. The percentage of women who approved or strongly approved of women's movement in 1991-3 in Eastern Europe was: 92 percent in Bulgaria, 93 percent in Russia, 89 percent in Belarus and 84 percent in Romania. The percent of women respondents who approved of women's movement in Western countries was following: 80 percent in Sweden, 79 percent in Germany, 72 percent in Spain and 55 percent in Italy (World Value Survey 1991-3). This can be regarded as a somewhat surprising result if we have in mind that the majority of the Eastern European respondents believe that men make better leaders than women. However, the fact that the data from different surveys shows some puzzling patterns regarding the Eastern European attitudes toward women position in public or private sphere raises the question of the validity of different survey questions. We have to question if different surveys really measure the same thing cross-nationally because different questions and concepts seems to be perceived differently in different countries and regions.

the idea of positive actions to achieve equality for women in the public and private areas.

Scholars have also frequently viewed Central and Eastern European women as anti-political because of their alleged avoidance of party and parliamentary politics. Eastern European women are often depicted as having lost political ground during the transition. In order to confirm this proposition scholars point to the decreased political representation of women as elected and appointed officials after the transition to democracy. Political representation has somehow become the indicator of how well women are doing in new democracies. Today we can all agree that women in Eastern Europe are poorly represented, although some recovery has occurred in recent elections. If this poor political representation of Eastern European women is placed in a global context, the figures from Eastern Europe can be compared quite favourably with the proportion of women in the parliaments in France which is 10.9 percent, with 13.3 percent representation of women in the US Congress, or with 11 percent in the Italian Parliament (the IPU 2000). The logical consequence would be to label women from all those countries as apolitical. I have, however, never noticed that scholars regard women in those countries as particularly apolitical. With a few exceptions, women are heavily under-represented everywhere with far fewer seats in parliament and other political bodies than they deserve according to their proportion of the population. Studies show that the considerable variation in women's representation between countries owes much to the fact that, in some countries, affirmative action policies are used by governments or parties, while others have no such policies (Lovenduski & Norris 1993; Phillips 2000). This indicates that the degree of women's political activity is not crucial for their representation in different political institutions.

Women as agents of change

After the fall of communism many Eastern European observers feared that women's movements in Eastern Europe would be too weak to defend women against the loss of services and other institutional arrangements which had strengthened their position in family and society during the communist era. For example, Chris Corrin argues that 'The lack of strong women's organisations in defensive or proactive campaigns in the immediate aftermath of the first elections in 1990-91 meant that many women who needed to defend their jobs, childcare services and benefits were not well placed to do so. Nor were many

women in a position to articulate their interests and needs' (Corrin 1998:244). Barbara Einhorn wondered: 'why did the democratically created space for the articulation of political alternatives ... not result in the emergence of a mass grassroots women's movement akin to those in Western Europe? And why does one encounter such an antipathy to feminism' (Einhorn 1993:183). In my opinion, we have to challenge the popular view of the anti-feminism of the Eastern European women's movements because I believe that it is vital to acknowledge the different forms that feminism takes and the different practises that can be recognised as feminist movements. In every Western country there are many women's groups that fight for different gender issues but do not want to refer to themselves as feminists. We also have to ask if we should treat 'Western Europe' as a unit for comparisons with post-communist countries. Even if some similarities between various women's movements may be identified, it is important to note that no women's movement in any Western country has only a single ideology, organisational form or group. "Western feminist ideas" are not homogeneous but are anchored into their own national-historical and class-specific contexts. Studies of specific women's movements conclude that the movement's internal characteristics including the type of actions, theoretical approaches and what form of mobilisation that is chosen, stem from the balance of the political forces in each national setting (see Katzenstein & Mueller 1987; Gardiner 1998; Briskin & Eliasson 1999).

The use of universalistic assumptions and categories in analysing women's movements in Eastern Europe has, unfortunately, caused a very complex and diverse reality to be over-simplified. Furthermore, by reinforcing the anti-feminist self-image of the category "Eastern European women" scholars have created essential differences between the East and the West, where 'Western women' are assumed to be liberated, politically mature and pro-feminist, while post-communist women are oppressed, politically immature, anti-feminist, and homogeneously powerless. I believe this ascribed essential difference between the East and the West to be only imaginary and, therefore, needs to be questioned and challenged.

We also have to ask on which empirical facts and theoretical assumptions the conclusions about "weak" and "anti-feminist" women's movements in post-communist Eastern Europe are based. As far as I know, there is no systematic comparative analysis of the activities or strategies of women's movements which would allow this type of generalisations. Talking to a few Eastern European women's activists or scholars is certainly not enough to draw any general conclusions. For example, Barbara Einhorn illustrates the Eastern European anti-feminism with quotes from the sociologist Jirina Sliklova who states that

the Eastern European women are 'sceptical of every form of messianism, and this scepticism is directed to feminism as well. Slogans like "sisterhood is global" ring bells of Marxist slogans like "proletarians of the world unite!" - and they are simply suspicious towards us' (Einhorn 1993:182). In my opinion, we have to question if Jirina Siklova can really speak on behalf of all Eastern European women. This quote is merely her personal observation and cannot be regarded as a general conclusion or a true empirical fact.

In my opinion, there are not enough theories in contemporary scholarship on women's movements in Eastern European countries. For example, without precise working definitions of women's movements or a clear idea of what indicators should be used in order to label women's movements in different countries as 'strong', 'weak', 'feminist' or 'anti-feminist', there is ample room for confusion and misunderstanding. In general, there is a lack of studies that relate research about post-communist women's movements to a broader literature on that topic. When different scholars are talking about the paradoxical "lack" of "feminist" response in the beginning of the transition period, they should, in my opinion, relate their assumptions and findings to contemporary scholarship on women's movements that has adopted the *political process theory*. According to this theory, the women's movements' political options depend entirely on the varied and complex ways in which the movements' goals and consciousness intersect with the interests of political parties and state institutions (see Katzetstein & Mueller 1987; Skocpol 1992; Costain 1995; Bashevkin 1998). Elements of the political structure (e.g. party backing, strong allies or powerful opposition, how the welfare state is organised) may increase or decrease the women's movements' ability to influence public policy. Simply put, a favourable structure of political opportunity is important in aiding women's movements' strength, in encouraging them to make demands and in having those demands met.

The fact that opportunity structure of the post-communist women's movements was limited during the nationalistic and conservative rule in many countries during the first part of the 1990s is not really surprising. Different empirical findings from the Western world point to the same direction: Women's movements appear to have limited opportunities to influence public policy and to mobilise other women to take action on gender issues during the rule of the conservative governments and political parties (e.g. Costain 1995; Bashevkin 1998). On the other hand, it is also not true that the women's movements in different post-communist countries were passive during the first few years of the transition even if there is no doubt that there are huge differences in women's activism between various countries. There is evidence from

several countries that women's organisations were actually mobilised around different strategic issues during that time, like for example; reproductive rights, anti-war political campaigns, rescuing women from poverty or dealing with victims of domestic violence or war. In several countries (e.g. Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic) women engaged in direct protests against proposals that were directed towards various restrictions of women's access to legal abortion (Jaquete & Wolchik 1998:7; Women 2000). We may also assume that women's activism in Slovenia and Croatia, for example, contributed to the preservation of some important women's constitutional rights as well as the abortion rights (Jalusic 1998:120; Women 2000).

In the other half of the 1990s, after the period of nationalistic and conservative rule, we are able to observe a wider scope of activism from women's movements' in many countries¹⁰. The Beijing conference also acted as a catalyst for the organisation and mobilisation of new women's groups and organisations which advocate equality for women in transitional countries (Sloat 2005). One relevant general difference between the women's movements is the one between the groups which actively oppose dealing with the state and those which articulate their demands through state representatives. The first stream consists mainly of autonomous women's groups that focus on starting "from the bottom up" by raising the consciousness of individual women. The second group does not deny the importance of raising consciousness, but does not regard it as a sufficient means for transforming civil society and politics. In the region today, we can identify both autonomous women's groups devoted to single issues such as sexual violence and wife-battering and women's organisations and networks whose aim it is to participate in the decision making process in order to articulate women's demands through legislation that is friendly to women (Spehar 2000). Some groups operate on a local level, others on the national level. Accordingly, we might assume that the Eastern European women's movements of today is fragmented in a manner similar to that of

¹⁰ Regarding the range of issues serving as the focus of the activities of women's organisations across the region, three prominent areas of interest may be identified; 1. *Women's political representation* (e.g. campaigns to promote women and women's agendas at the election, to increase the number of women in parliament and public offices, to monitor and influence elections from women's perspective etc) 2. *Women's rights* (e.g. campaigns and lobbying for enforcement of e.g. anti-discrimination legislation, monitoring the implementation of current legislations, campaigns to increase the awareness of women's human rights among policy makers, human rights activists and professionals such as lawyers, social workers, journalists and teachers) 3. *Activism against violence against women and domestic abuse* (e.g. public campaigns to include fighting the violence against women into society's agenda of important issues and to change the perception of it as being a marginal, exclusively women's issue) (Spehar 2000).

the movements in other countries and that a significant part of women's movements in different Eastern European countries is far from apolitical and anti-feminist. It is, however, unfortunate that there is an apparent lack of research that relates observed changes in gender policies during the 1990s to the activism of the women's movements. Assessing the different impacts of the activism of contemporary women's movements on gender policy in Eastern European countries is certainly an area of great interest for the future research on the subject.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article has been to emphasise the shortcomings of existing work on Eastern European women's movements and how gender policy is created by pointing to some logical as well as methodological problems that have prevented the cumulative gathering of knowledge. The shortcomings I have discussed were the following: the tendency to focus predominantly on the extremely deleterious effect of post-communist reforms on women and thereby creating the category of the victimised "Eastern European women"; an excessive reliance on secondary empirical sources when analysing post-communist reform on women's position in the society; the lack of systematic comparative research and the use of universalistic assumptions and categories in analysing women's movements in Eastern Europe, which has caused a very complex and diverse reality to be over-simplified. On the basis of these shortcomings I will, briefly, suggest how they may be overcome and improve our knowledge about gender policy formation and women's movements in Eastern Europe.

The overwhelming impression from reading studies on women's movements and women's situation in post-communist countries is that very little cumulative data has been gathered. In my opinion, future Eastern European women's movements and gender policy research will benefit from, and will make a major contribution to, women's movements in general and gender policy literature, if it focuses on a) assessing the political and cultural impact of the contemporary women's movements, b) identifying factors that shape the constraints and opportunities for women's movements to influence public policies; c) examining how gender policies are framed by women's movements, and d) identifying the converging and diverging patterns of gender policies and women's movements activism that are emerging in different post-communist countries.

As I have already mentioned, the theoretical basis of the contemporary scholarship on women's movements in post-communist countries is

insufficient. In my opinion, the study of the outcomes and consequences of Eastern European women's movements is one of the most neglected topics in the literature. There is, for example, little systematic research that focuses on organised attempts of women's movements to increase women's presence in governments, and less still with regard to their explicit attempts to mobilise and target political elites on policy issues. This kind of neglect is quite astonishing because the ultimate goal of women's movements is to bring about political and social change, in order to strengthen the position of women in the different spheres of social life. The scholars of women's movements in Eastern European countries have to rise to the challenge of specifying the conditions under which activism assumes particular forms and leads to particular results. Scholars have to try to find logic in the policy process in order to understand what type of policy is applicable in different Eastern European countries and what policy changes can be expected to be more difficult. We have to ask if certain institutional characteristics provide some issues with a more privileged position than others. Which conditions are universal for all advocates of gender policies in the different Eastern European countries and to what extent are different political actors including women's movements bound by country-specific conditions? Scholars of women's movements demonstrate that the success of women's movements also depends on how the cultural framework, collective identity, and political discourse transformed the structure of political opportunity for activist women and feminists, across a wide range of countries. In addition, apart from analysing different elements of the political opportunity structure that can represent constraints or opportunities for women's movements, it is also important to analyse how the women's movements in Eastern Europe correspond to certain elements of the political opportunity structure and how different gender policies are framed by women's movements.

In order to get more systematic theoretical and empirical knowledge about women's movements in Eastern European countries, future research, to a large extent, must be based on a comparative perspective. Many scholars who analyse women's movements and gender policy in post-communist countries do not take the comparative agenda seriously. There are, however, many books that gather essays from different authors, who discuss different aspects of women's movements' activism and gender policies in different post-communist countries, but there are not many that explicitly compare the same aspects of the women's movements or collective action cross-nationally. Even if we get much valuable insightful in-

formation about women's activism and gender policies from these case studies, the already knowledgeable reader may want a bit more than is provided by contemporary books on the subject, both theoretically and empirically. A large share of supposedly comparative work looks too much like an unconnected series of chapters (usually written by national experts), each summarising the experience of one country and expecting the reader to draw her or his own conclusion. Attempts are often made to point out superficial similarities, while key differences are neglected. Comparison is impossible unless it is clear that the chapters really focus on equivalent activities.

When analyzing the position of women in the different spheres of social life, future research projects have to shift their focus from comparing women's position in today's society with the communist system towards comparing other countries and regions, using the available theoretical tools. Scholars also have to apply deeper gender policy analysis, concentrating their efforts on one or few aspects of gender policy instead of trying to cover all policy areas in one article or a book, which often leads to the analytic exclusion of the full range of aspects which may strengthen or impair women's position in different spheres of social life. I believe it to be possible to highlight and problematise gender inequalities in post-communist countries without victimising the entire population of Eastern European women. I hope that future studies, to a large extent, can contribute to a broader literature on women's movements and gender policy.

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