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One step forward, two steps back: women in the post-communist states

Suzanne LaFont *

City University of New York, Kingsborough Community College, 2001 Oriental Boulevard, Brooklyn, NY 11235, USA

Abstract

The role and status of women in the post-communist countries has been and continues to be varied and full of contradictions. This article discusses the historical, social, economic, and political dynamics affecting the lives of women during the transition from communism to democracy. It argues that democracy, rather than diminishing gender discrimination, has widened the gender gap through declines in women's political representation and increases in women's unemployment and underemployment. Recently, however, the proliferation of women's organizations and the growth of women's studies programs suggests a more optimistic outlook for the future.

Keywords: Women; Gender; Post-communism; History; Democracy; Social change

"Equality is not simply giving women the right to shovel manure." Russian Feminist, Valentina Dobrokhotova (1984: 9).

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine and analyze the role of women in the post-communist countries. Over a decade has passed since the collapse of the iron curtain stunned the world. Yet, changes in the post-communist countries have not been as positive nor as swift as originally presumed. The transitions have proved to

* Tel.: +1-718-368-5453.
E-mail address: suzannelafont@hotmail.com (S. LaFont).

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be complex, difficult, and uneven. The shift from command to a market economy has created many social and economic problems: growing unemployment, inflation, a decline in real wages, and general economic insecurity (Harper, 1999). While millions throughout the region have suffered, a recent UNICEF report confirmed that post-communist women have been disproportionately disadvantaged during the transition and, in fact, have lost some of the gains made under communism (Poolos, 1999).

Evaluations of the status and role of women can employ several different criteria. Valerie Bunce (1995: 92) noted that "postcommunism is far more than a transition to democracy; it is a revolution extending to politics, economics and social life". With this in mind, I have chosen to analyze the role and status of women in terms of political representation, employment opportunities and reproductive rights as three basic indicators of women's political, economic and social well-being. The data presented here are a compilation of my own research, and secondary sources, with statistical data added to supplement the qualitative information.[1]

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the status of women in all the post-communist countries. The majority of cross-national comparisons will include Russia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. The status of women in Albania, Romania, former Yugoslavia, and former East Germany differs enough to make their inclusion into this paper problematic. For different reasons, the situation of women in these countries falls outside of the generalizations presented here. This is not to argue that the women in the other post-communist societies are a homogeneous group. Women are as diverse as their respective national populations. Intra-national dynamics of class and ethnicity produce diversity in their cultures, histories and lives. Yet, the social and economic policies that the communist states adopted were primarily adopted from the Soviet Union, which itself generalized women (Purvaneckienė, 1998). This has created enough cross-national structural similarities to permit comparisons and generalizations among the aforementioned countries. Early post-communist scholarship emphasized the disruptions, the upheavals, changes, and transformations, but more current analyses focus on continuities and legacies (Gal, 2000). It therefore follows that this discussion should begin with how the communist legacy shaped the role and status of women.

Historical background

The communist governments did not have a singular or constant position on the role of women. Nineteenth century communist ideology included the liberation of

[1] This paper is based on bibliographic research, interviews and observations. I spent the 1994–95 academic year in Lithuania as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Women's Study Center at Kaunas University of Technology and have edited a book of essays written by Lithuanian women scholars titled *Women in Transition: Voices from Lithuania*, SUNY Press (1998). During the 1995–96 academic year, I taught in the MA Intercultural Dialogue Program at Sofia University in Bulgaria and continued my research on women and post-communism.

women as an integral part of revolution. However, as the communist agenda changed, so did its stance on women's emancipation, ranging from the early Bolshevik declaration of the death of the family to Stalin's campaigns to promote family stability (Goldman, 1993). In the 1950s, having achieved substantial increases in women's employment and representation in government (primarily due to quotas), the Soviet government declared that gender equality had been achieved, and many of the other communist countries followed suit (Wolchik, 1989). Pictures of women in hard hats, women technicians, and women doctors supported the illusion that women in the communist countries had, indeed, been liberated. Yet, rather than experiencing complete emancipation, communist women were forced into a pseudo emancipation mainly because their labor was needed for communist industrial development (LaFont, 1998). The importance of women's role as the producers of future workers was recognized, while at the same time state ideology encouraged women's participation in the labor force and deprived housewifery of status (Korovushkina, 1994). Work was a duty, not a right, and low wages necessitated both wives' and husbands' incomes for family survival. The equality that the communist governments proclaimed translated into women working like men in the labor market. Importantly, no counter "equality" existed for men's involvement in the domestic domain. Precommunist patriarchy remained intact, with women shouldering the burden of economic and domestic labor. Instead of truly liberating women, state communism turned into a system that doubly exploited women in their roles as producers and reproducers. Their official glorification, represented in propaganda and the numerous statues of strong women proletarians standing beside their male counterparts, unfortunately, did not reflect the reality of women's lives (Peto, 1994).

Accounts of women's lives reveal that they did not feel emancipated (Sariban, 1984). They recount feeling exhausted and guilty, exhausted from working an average of six more hours a week than men, and guilty because they were unable to fulfill any of their roles adequately.[2] Women had what is commonly referred to as the triple shift or burden, working for paid employment, performing the majority of domestic duties (which increased substantially during periods of shortages by having to stand in long queues for basic goods), and participating as social activists. Bulgarian women described all of this responsibility with the saying "It is difficult and hazardous to carry three watermelons under one arm" (Petrova, 1993: 23).

Women did make inroads into traditionally male dominated fields such as engineering, medicine, and higher education, and their employment rates reached levels unknown in the West (Grigor'ev, 1994). In the 1980s, in the USSR, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, close to 90% of working-age women were employed.[3] Despite this, gender segregation in the labor force persisted with women concentrated in the low status, low paying jobs and being passed over for promotions

[2] This figure is based on personal time date and includes data from Bulgaria (1986), Hungary (1986), Poland (1984), Lithuania (1988), Latvia (1987) and USSR (1986) from data presented in *The World's Women 1995*: 132.

[3] Data is from a table prepared from the 1981, 1991, 1992, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*, International Labour Office, Geneva, printed in Einhorn, 1993: 266.

and important positions because their child care and domestic responsibilities prevented them from being "reliable" workers (Korovushkina, 1994). Furthermore, a gender-specific gap in income was the norm, with women in the USSR, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary earning 66–75% of male salaries.[4] In contrast to the small percentage of women in "white collar" professions, the majority of women worked in unskilled or semi-skilled, low status jobs, while male workers were concentrated in more valued fields of heavy industry, construction, and transportation (Kanopienė, 1998). Even when women became concentrated in traditionally male professions, such as professors and doctors, the profession itself became "feminized" and tended to lose both status and remuneration (Peers, 1985).

Communism did provide women with rights and social entitlements which at the time were often unavailable to women in Western countries (and are still unavailable to many women in the world): legal guarantees of women's equality, greater access to education, the easing of cultural and/or religious mores which inhibited women's economic and political activities, hence increasing opportunities in the public sphere, property and inheritance rights, child allowances, state-sponsored child care, lengthy maternity leaves, and guaranteed return employment after maternity leaves (Verdery, 1994; Dakova, 1995).

These social entitlements theoretically attempted, but failed, to reconcile women's roles as producers and reproducers. Women who placed their children in state-run childcare institutions were considered "bad" mothers, while women who juggled job and family were considered "bad" workers because their domestic responsibilities made them unreliable employees (Nemény i, 1995). Such laws and policies also reinforced women's reproductive and child rearing roles by granting benefits to mothers and excluding fathers, e.g. until recently, fathers did not have the same parental leave rights and benefits as mothers in Hungary, and in Poland, prior to 1975, fathers were ineligible for child care sick days (Goven, 2000; Einhorn, 1993).

The social policy benefits and the quality of childcare in state institutions has been bitterly condemned (Stoev, 1994). Hungarian feminist, Eniko Bollobas (1993: 203) explains, "The various benefits women enjoyed in the communist societies, such as full employment, free health care, maternity leave, and cheap abortion, only sound appealing to foreign observers, to whom these words have different and much more positive meanings and who may not know the reality of the quality of such services offered. In Hungarian — as well as Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Russian — these words sound pitiful, cheap, poor and gloomy, because that is the reality they evoke".

Furthermore, in their efforts to develop heavy industry, the early communist governments neglected the modernization of housework, such as affordable washing machines (Meyers, 1985). The Party did acknowledge the drudgery of housework and made unsuccessful attempts in some countries to alleviate domestic chores through communal kitchens and laundry services, but for the most part, women's domestic and personal needs were allotted a low priority. Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic,

[4] Data from Bulgaria is from Dakova, 1995: 3. Data for Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland is from Table A6.2, Einhorn, 1993: 268. Data from USSR is from Eisenstein, 1993: 311.

speaking at the 1990 Socialist Scholars' Conference in New York, shocked her audience by holding up a tampon in one hand and a sanitary pad in the other. She asserted that the unavailability of these products in Bulgaria (where she had recently visited) was evidence of the communist system's lack of commitment to the emancipation of women (Drakulic, 1991). The example is apt. The fact that the communist states could send people into space, and yet could not, and would not, produce a basic product to meet women's monthly needs says more than quotas and statistics about their lack of commitment to women.

In the 1980s, *perestroika* marked a change from totalitarianism and was heralded as progress towards creating a more open society. However, in this new era in which the communist government could admit having made mistakes, one of the mistakes acknowledged was misinterpreting the role of women. Consider the following 1987 quote of Mikhail Gorbachev (1995):

> "Over the years . . . we failed to pay attention to women's specific right and needs arising from their role as mother and home-maker, and their indispensable educational function as regards children. Engaged in scientific research, working on construction sites, in production and in the services, and involved in creative activities, women no longer have enough time to perform their everyday duties at home — housework, the upbringing of children and the creation of a good family atmosphere. We have discovered that many of our problems — in children's and young people's behavior, in our morals, culture and in production — are partially caused by the weakening of family ties and slack attitude to family responsibilities. This is a paradoxical result of our sincere and politically justified desire to make women equal with men in everything. Now in the course of *perestroika*, we have begun to overcome this short-coming. That is why we are now holding heated debates in the press, in public organizations, at work and at home, about the question of what we should do to make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission." (Racioppi and O'Sullivan, 1995: 824)

Whereas, under communism women were assigned the roles of worker, mother, and political activist, under *perestroika* they were reassigned the role of mother and homemaker. Where is women's right to self-determination in this agenda? Gorbachev admitted that the communist governments failed to reconcile the role of women as producers and reproducers, but instead of moving forward with new ideas and restructuring their efforts, the new society allowed the state to shake off even the pretense of gender equality. The new "womanly mission" as suggested here would be a reductionist retraction of her role in civil life.

Women's political voice within the new male democracies

Under many of the communist regimes, women were guaranteed a percentage (usually around 30%) of the seats in their respective Parliaments and local governing bodies (Ostrovska, 1994). Although these quotas were duly met, women representa-

tives were not necessarily chosen for their voice as women. On the contrary, women were frequently recruited from the countryside to fulfill the quotas rather than to articulate women's interests. In the Soviet Union, such recruitment was labeled the 'milkmaid syndrome'. These women had little or no political savvy and were not kept informed (Corrin, 1994). This practice, however, was not necessarily confined to women, and the entire concept of "representation" during this period should be evaluated within the political context of totalitarianism.

Currently, the integration of women into post-communist political life is largely being ignored by the new male dominated governments (Fuszara, 2000). The post-communist governments have replaced the quota system with democratic elections. Not surprisingly, the number of women as elected and appointed officials has decreased and women are currently poorly represented in their respective governments (Table 1).

Referring to women's lack of voice in the new governments, Marija Pavilionienė (1998), the head of the Women's Studies Center at Vilnius University, explains that women identify political action with "masculine behavior, power struggles, private property disputes, corruption and hypocrisy". Women have been and continue to be overworked, and their lives have been over-politicized, the combination of which has led to apathy and/or the unwillingness to enter the male dominated sphere of politics. Many post-communist women view participation in politics as just one more burden (Teišerskytė, 1998).

Not all women, however, are content to take a political backseat. Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Poland have had women prime ministers during the post-communist era, and in 1999 Vaira Vike-Freberga became the president of Latvia (UN, 2000). These women, the first in their nations to hold the highest office, considered themselves to be 'exceptions' rather than part of a trend towards the acceptance of women in high office. Reneta Injova, appointed as Prime Minister of an interim Bulgarian government from October 18, 1994 to January 27, 1995, stated, "I am the exception

Table 1
Percentage of parliamentary seats in single or lower chamber occupied by women[a]

Country	1987	1995	1999
Bulgaria	21%	13%	11%
Czech Republic[b]	30%	10%	15%
Hungary	21%	11%	8%
Poland	20%	13%	13%
Russian Federation[c]	35%	13%	10%
Slovakia[b]	30%	15%	13%

[a] The figures in this table, unless otherwise indicated, are from *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics,* published by the United Nations (UN, 2000).

[b] Because the Czech Republic and Slovakia were one country in 1987, the figure from that year is the figure reported for Czechoslovakia.

[c] The 1987 figure for the Russian Federation is the figure reported for the USSR, a separate figure for Russia during that period is unavailable (*The World's Women*, 1995).

in modern Bulgarian history". (Boncheva, 1995: 4). Kazimiera Prunskienė, former Prime Minister of Lithuania, titled her essay for the Beijing Conference, *I was Regarded as an Exception* and complained that the male-dominated Parliament (Seima) would not allow her to appoint any female ministers. She writes, "Having won independence, government posts became objects of competition, and the rules of the game changed. In seeking to win higher positions and to reinforce their influence, and monopolist positions, men started to form intrigues and to compromise me. Attempts were made aggressively and incorrectly to shove me out of political activity . . ." (Prunskienė, 1995: 16).

In summary, now that the public sphere of politics and business is gaining in value, women are being assigned to the private sphere of the home which ironically has lost the heightened value it gained under communism as an anti-totalitarian sanctuary. Women were guaranteed representation when representation was little more than a formality, and now that the political arena is being empowered, they are being poorly represented.

In male-dominated governments, it is unlikely that women's interests will ever be thoroughly addressed or understood. For women to be fully integrated, they must have a voice in government to protect their interests, and appropriate legislation protecting their participation in the labor market and facilitating their double role of reproducers and producers. Simply increasing the number of women in politics is not necessarily the answer to protecting women's rights. Not all women politicians are motivated by the desire to promote gender equality. Yet, the progressive legal and social benefits available to women in the Nordic countries, where women's representation in parliaments has reached between 30% and 40%, suggests that increased representation relates to greater gender equality (Nussbaum, 1999).

Politically, the most important aspect of women's empowerment is how the new governments define and reinforce women's role in the labor market and family through laws and social policies. Will the new governments address women's rights within the discourse of human rights, or will the rights of mothers and their children overshadow women's human rights for what is perceived to be the greater need of the nation (Goven, 2000)?

Women in the labor market

Men dominated the top of the occupational pyramid during the communist era, and that situation has not changed. The more competitive job market threatens to inhibit women's potential to benefit from the transition from a command to a market economy. A glance at the "Help Wanted" section of local newspapers reveals that foreign joint ventures openly prefer men. Gender discrimination in local hiring practices is also prevalent, and research among women Lithuanian students revealed that 40% had personally experienced gender discrimination (Jucevičienė, 1998). Newspapers have numerous gender-specific job advertisements, and it is not unusual to see advertisements which require women to be young and attractive in order to be considered employable. The Lithuanian daily paper, *Lietuvos Rytas*, carried an adver-

tisement placed by the Ministry of Transportation seeking women secretaries and male technicians. This is in direct conflict with the country's Constitution which has outlawed gender discrimination.[5]

Under such circumstances it is not surprising that women's unemployment rates increased and are continuing to increase. Between 1991 and 1997 (the latest figures available) unemployment for women ranged from 6% to 15%, and women constituted an estimated 45% to 70% of the unemployed throughout the region (UN, 2000). These figures, however, must be read with caution for two reasons: (1) many post-communist women and men do not bother to report their unemployment because benefits and/or assistance is meager or nonexistent, and (2) the figures do not include underemployment. Therefore, it is difficult to get a realistic picture of women's status in the job market.

In Russia it is estimated that 80% of the jobs lost in restructuring had previously been filled by women (Waters, 1993). Research has suggested that the probability of obtaining new employment in East Central Europe is three times greater for a man than a woman (Einhorn, 1993). The 1994 Lithuanian Employment Survey found that only 25% of unemployed women were able to secure jobs in one to three months, whereas, 50% of unemployed men found jobs within this same time period.

Ironically, for young women, discrimination in the new job market is linked to the communist legacy. Social entitlements which were designed to facilitate women's participation in the work force are creating increased discrimination (Guobuzaitė, 1998). Although most of the constitutions have made social entitlements gender neutral (e.g., fathers are eligible for parental leave), it is usually mothers who take time off from work for child care responsibilities. As the state begins to shift the economic burden of social entitlements to private industry, women, as potential mothers, become expensive to employ. Alina Zvinklienė (1995: 12) from Lithuania, writes, "New social insurance clearly ensures women's unemployment, since opportunities in the private business sector have clearly decreased, especially for women who have small children, because the employer is not interested in paying women-mothers the social guarantees prescribed by the law".

The situation in the public sector is not much better. Vera Dakova (1995: 2) from Bulgaria explains, "These legal regulations [paid maternity leave, employment return guarantees, etc.] do not reflect the real capability of the state to provide the mentioned advantages and guarantees to women — neither through its resources, nor through the mechanisms of control". Without the totalitarian state to enforce employment polices, there is a greater potential for them to be ignored or misused. Reports from Russia claim that laws relating to maternity benefits are being ignored (Einhorn, 1993). In Lithuania, an unemployment counselor explained to me that women are being asked by employers to sign contracts waiving their legal rights to employment benefits. Even when social programs and policies were initially left intact, inflation made the benefits financially meaningless (LaFont, 2000).

[5] The Lithuanian language does not allow for gender neutral nouns, so gender neutral ads could get awkward or lengthy, but there was no doubt that they wanted women secretaries and men technicians.

Despite the dismal employment situation, it does not seem that women are abandoning the job market. On average, women continue to constitute almost half of the workforce in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Russia (UN, 2000). The economic decline in the region means that returning to the 'hearth' is simply not an option for most women. Furthermore, a survey in Russia found that women take pride in their work and would continue to work even if their husbands earned a "family wage".[6] Forty percent of the women surveyed in the Czech and Slovak Republics claimed that they would continue working even if their husbands earned enough to support them (another 32% said that they would consider working, and 28% said they would definitely stay at home).[7]

On a practical and immediate level, the economic situation of women is crucial because many of the same dynamics that created the feminization of poverty in the West are evolving in the post-communist societies (LaFont, 1998). Early marriage (average age is 23, region-wide) and childbearing, coupled with high divorce rates (over 40% — with a few exceptions such as Bulgaria at 20%) means that the proportion of women-headed households is growing (UN, 2000). Low paying jobs, unemployment, and the erosion or disregard of social benefits all point to growth of poverty among women and the families they support. In addition, women's longevity exceeds men's longevity by an average of ten years in every post-communist country (UN, 2000). Mandatory retirement age for women is early, 55 years of age for women in Bulgaria and Hungary, and 60 years of age in Poland (60 for men in Bulgaria and Hungary and 65 for Polish men) (Adamik, 1993; Hauser et al., 1993). Thus, women are not only living longer, but retiring at an earlier age than men. This leaves them dependent on pensions for several years. Inflation and rollbacks on subsidies mean that pensions are inadequate, leaving many women pensioners the poorest of the poor.

It has been suggested that one way to alleviate the drain on the welfare systems is to raise the age of retirement (Sachs, 1995). While, at face value, this idea seems reasonable, the ramifications for women and children need to be carefully considered. For example, state-sponsored child care centers were widely used, yet 50% of the day care centers in Poland and in Lithuania closed between 1992 and 1994, and privatization of many of the remaining centers makes them unaffordable to most families (LDS, 1994). Thus, working mothers with young children are increasingly dependent on their own mothers to assist them in child care. Under these circumstances, raising the age of retirement may solve one problem while exacerbating another.

Women do not have a monopoly on poverty. As the level of inequality throughout the region has grown, there are emerging very evident "winners" and "losers". The winners represent a very small elite group of successful entrepreneurs and those who profit from the "grey economy", while there are millions of "losers" (58 million

[6] Waters, 1993: 292, quoting Anastasia Posadskaya's research. Mamonova, 1993: 148, cites N. Rimachevskaya's sociological research.

[7] Siklova, 1993: 76, quoting results of a 1991 survey, "Women's Employment", in *Report of the Institute for Public Meaning*, ed. V. Kobylkova and Jan Michalec.

Russians are living below the poverty line) (WFB, 1999).[8] Given the urgency of the economic crisis, the needs of women as a specific group have been ignored. Those without the strength, skills, determination, or time to participate in the struggle for resources and power are at risk of being left behind without the safety net of a welfare state to catch them before they fall into economic despair.

In summary, we find that the communist model of simply increasing women's employment rates was not the answer to women's emancipation. The communist legacy created a tradition of women's participation in the labor force, but the new governments are not building on that existing structure. With social policies being ignored, the threat is the devolution of women's rights. In the long-term, without policies protecting their reproductive role, women are further disadvantaged. Yet the state has to have the desire and the power to enforce such policies. The role of the state is to ensure the rights and well-being of its citizens, but "cowboy capitalism" has no such social conscience. The goal of the state should be to enforce existing laws and policies which protect women's participation in the labor force, not to stand aside as they are eroded by the force of the market economy.

Nationalism and women's right to self-determination

Promoting patriotism and nationalist sentiments are popular and wide-spread ideological tools used to inspire national confidence during periods of political or economic upheaval.[9] Therefore, it is not surprising that the collapse of the communist regimes has fostered a resurgence in nationalist ideology. Even before the collapse of communism the role model for women had begun to shift from worker to devoted mother and wife (Rueschemeyer, 1998). Idealization of motherhood advanced to the forefront of popular and political discourse as the new governments tried to reestablish and recreate a national identity, largely from their pre-communist pasts. Opposition groups emerged or joined coalitions creating popular fronts which promoted nationalist and religious ideas (Feffer, 1992). Popular nationalist propaganda glorified women's role as the mothers of future citizens and encouraged women to return to their "traditional" place within the domestic domain.

Many of the post-communist nations are proud and nostalgic about their pre-communist histories which are now portrayed as happier and better societies without such problems as high divorce rates, unmarried mothers, juvenile delinquency, etc. (Goven, 1993). Political propaganda, the media and the Church point to women's participation in the labor force as the cause of social ills, in contrast to the idealized pre-communist eras when women stayed at home and took good care of their children and husbands (Gineitienė, 1998).

The sentiment is that if women would only return to the family, where they

[8] "Grey economy" is used to refer to mafia-type organizations that engage in illegal activities (Milanovic, 1994).

[9] I will use Kellas's definition of nationalism as both an ideology and a form of behavior which seeks to promote and defend the interests of the nation-state (Kellas, 1991: 3).

"belong", this past period of supposed societal bliss could be recreated. Yet, studies of the pre-communist eras show that history is indeed being reinvented; society was not free from many of the social ills found today; nor were women always staying at home as housewives (Purvaneckienė, 1998). The truth is that most of these societies were agricultural, and women worked alongside men in the fields until the communist push for industrialization. The bourgeois family of man as provider and woman as homemaker was certainly not the norm (Baršauskienė and Rymeikytė, 1998; Todorova, 1993).

For women, the dangers of nationalism are twofold: (1) by emphasizing women's role as the reproducers of future citizens, the conservative nature of nationalism relegates women to a secondary role in civil life, and (2) by granting primacy to the importance of the ethno-nation, nationalism masks gender-based (as well as class-based) inequality.

The recent push to return post-communist women to the domestic domain is linked not only to increased familial stability but also to the need to increase birth rates. Region-wide demographics reveal fertility rates ranging from 1.2 to 1.5. The consequence of such low rates is the decline in populations (UN, 2000). With fertility rates articulated as a threat to national survival, the image of the "death of a nation" is invoked. Campaigns to increase birth rates glorify motherhood. In Lithuania, slogans such as "We are a perishing nation" are popular; in Russia, a post-communist campaign slogan bluntly advocated "Women go home"; Bulgarian slogans advocate "Back to home and family"; and in Hungary, during the 1990 elections, posters "celebrating women's domesticity and motherhood adorned city walls" (Lampland, 1994: 286; Gineitienė, 1998; Mamonova, 1993: 141). Nationalists pay little attention to the reality of the nation's ability to support an increased population in terms of housing, schools, and childcare. In addition, the responsibility for caring for the growing elderly population falls mainly on women. Ignoring all these factors, nationalists continue to encourage women to bear children for the 'motherland'.

Consequently, pro-life movements have gained ground in almost every country (Bulgaria is the exception here) (Kowalewska, 1998).[10] The attempts to ban abortion have been one of the most emotionally-charged issues in post-communist discourse. Restrictions have been discussed in Russia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Lithuania (Scheppele, 1995). In Poland an ongoing struggle has spanned the decade with activists fighting fiercely on both sides. In 1997, the conservatives prevailed and currently Poland has the strictest abortion regulations in the region.[11] Eleonora Zielińska (2000: 53) concludes that "The legal battle over abortion is a highly politicized process that serves interests perceived to be far greater than those of enhancing women's control of their fertility. Although the battle is waged in a democratically elected Parliament, in Poland, democracy remains 'democracy with a male face'".

[10] After severe restrictions prior to 1989, Bulgaria seems to be relatively free from antiabortion movements.

[11] Women in Poland are allowed to have an abortion to "preserve physical or mental health (or to save a woman's life)". In every other post-communist country abortion is available "on request" (UN, 2000).

To place the abortion issue in context, we must remember that abortion was, and remains the main form of fertility regulation in most post-communist countries. With little or no sex education and lack of information and access to affordable contraception, abortion rates are high but have been decreasing recently (Wolchik, 2000).

The Catholic Church, the most powerful religious institution in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Lithuania, has its own agenda and sees the transition period as an opportunity to end abortion rights. It has sponsored public ceremonies mourning aborted fetuses as lost citizens.[12] Many politicians in Catholic countries are afraid of alienating the Church and are avoiding or supporting religious-based, anti-abortion movements. In October 1994, a conference titled "Lithuanian Family: Traditions and the Future" was held at Parliament. The Prime Minister, the Bishop, a UN representative and others (an all male panel) discussed family issues. No one protested as the Lithuanian Catholic Bishop used this government-sponsored conference to argue for not only a ban on abortion but on all forms of birth control other than natural family planning. The pro-natalism of the Church, conjoined with nationalist propaganda, creates a moral, spiritual and patriotic basis for reproduction.

Low birth rates are blamed on women who are portrayed as selfish and materialistic for putting their own interests or comforts above those of the nation (Gineitienė, 1998). Young women who watched their mothers struggle with the triple burden are being encouraged to see their devotion to motherhood and family as a solution to the nation's problems. In essence, the idea of returning women to the home "kills two birds with one stone". With unemployment levels reaching unknown highs and birth rates reaching unknown lows, successfully persuading women to stay home and have children can superficially solve both problems simultaneously. Yet, defining women in terms of their reproductive role is a short-term solution based on demographic issues, pressure from the Catholic Church, and nationalist sentiments. The idea that the demographic problem could be solved through immigration is deemed unacceptable and is not seriously entertained (Gal, 1994).

Despite all the pro-life, pro-motherhood rhetoric in the region, women are not returning to the hearth in droves, fertility rates are not soaring, and abortion rights seem secure for the time being. Much of the speculation relating to the popularity of the pro-life movement seems to have been overstated. The pro-life movement appears to be a small, vocal minority, not unlike the pro-life movement in the United States (in fact, international connections exist).

Women's perspective on women's issues

With wide-spread gender discrimination in the labor market leading to women's higher unemployment rates, and under representation in the new governments, it

[12] In Kaunas, Lithuania, nuns and church members parade down the streets holding candles. Each candle is supposed to represent a life lost to abortion. In Krakow, Poland the main Church has dedicated one of its chapels to large color photographs of aborted fetuses. In Hungary, pro-life groups pray for "the almost five million Hungarian children who were aborted over the last 35 years" (Einhorn, 1993: 95).

would seem that women would have quickly organized to counteract these trends. Yet, throughout the region, women's movements have not been widely supported. The reasons for this are complex and may relate to the communist ideology which revised the very concepts of equality and liberation to fit into the communist discourse (Funk, 1993). Some women may reject the concept of gender equality which they equate with the unpleasant memories of the pseudo equality that they experienced under communism. Russian feminist Olga Lipovskaya (1994: 274) writes, "Total rejection of the socialist ideals of the past has seriously challenged the notion of sexual equality. The baby is being thrown out with the bath water".

Rejecting the idea of communist equality is seen by some women as liberating. My experience teaching women's studies in Lithuania supports this idea. During my first lecture on Western feminist theory, after a few minutes of murmuring in Lithuanian among my students, which I could not understand, one student raised her hand and asked, "So, we are wondering, who is more liberated, the woman who works or the woman who stays at home?". They felt that having the choice to stay home was liberating. Remembering that under communism work was a duty, not a right, and that the patriarchal division of labor in the household persisted, women who have the option of being oppressed by two systems, domestic patriarchy and the discriminatory labor market or by only one system, patriarchy, could certainly construe staying home as liberating. For many women opposing the patriarchal division of labor in the home was not perceived possible or even desirable (LaFont, 1998).

Nationalism has also inhibited women's movements because many women identify with other groups, most prominently the ethno-nation, before they identify as women in terms of group interests. Their role as citizens is to build the national image. This type of national solidarity is implied by Estonian writer Maimu Berg, "Estonian women have nobody to fight against. Our men are so defenseless and have suffered so from the cruel destiny of our state that the very task of women is to protect them by making a stable home" (Hallas, 1994: 299). Women who promote women's liberation are considered unpatriotic because this is perceived as a threat to the family which is the foundation of the nation-state (Daskalova, 2000).

Women who take an interest in women's issues are at risk of being labeled feminists. The entire concept of feminism has been discredited with the term being misunderstood and associated with the most extreme Western feminists. The Eastern stereotype of a Western feminist is a masculine, domineering woman who hates men. Although many women lead their lives in ways most Western feminists would label as liberated (e.g., obtaining high education, achieving economic independence, and valuing their careers), most post-communist women are reluctant to use the term. For example, when Dalia Teišerskytė, one of the founders of the Party of Women in Lithuania told me she would be visiting New York City, I offered to put her in contact with politically active US feminists, she vehemently responded that she was not interested in meeting any feminists.

Women with whom I have spoken in Bulgaria and Lithuania often point out all the stages that the Western feminist movement went through to reach its current level and suggest that post-communist feminism is in its infancy. Feminist groups began appearing in the communist nations in the 1970s when the UN Decade of

Women offered an international forum for discourse on women's issues, but most groups were suppressed. In 1973 in Hungary, students petitioning against the new abortion restrictions were expelled from school, and in Russia, women publishing feminist literature were harassed by the secret police, and some were sent into exile (Molyneux, 1991; Morgan, 1984).

The collapse of the totalitarian regimes has provided women with increased opportunities for dialogue and criticism. Although initially confined to a small group of the intellectual elite (as were the early movements in the West), feminism has been gaining momentum in the post-communist countries. By 1995, gender and women's studies centers had been established in universities in Moscow, Vilnius, Kaunas and Budapest but funding for these programs is scarce. In 1993, Anastasia Posadskaya (1993: 271), the co-founder of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies, observed, "Political liberalization gave a chance to the development of gender studies, the introduction of the market economy may kill this chance". Fortunately, although many programs are struggling, Posadskaya's prediction has not come true. Currently there are so many programs in the region that a directory was published in 1999 to facilitate gender and women's studies information dissemination (NEWW, 2000).

In addition to the proliferation of programs, dozens of national and international conferences on women's issues have been held throughout the region, bringing together women to discuss surviving the transition and planning how to protect and promote women's rights. Ending domestic violence (a previously "silent" problem) and addressing the trafficking of women in the sex industry (a growing international problem) have been some of the more recent topics (Poolos, 1999).

To combat gender discrimination and facilitate international cooperation, in 1990, the Network of East–West Women (NEWW), was established. It is an online forum focusing on women's issues in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. From humble beginnings, it now has over 2000 members in forty countries. It links women's rights advocates from Albania to Russia with each other and with their feminist counterparts in the US and Western Europe. The network provides links and information, country by country, about women's organizations and conferences. They offer an online women's journal, *WE/MYI*, available in Russian and English, maintain a legal coalition, offer legal fellowships, and act as a general resource center.

The number of women's organizations has become so great it has necessitated the compilation of several directories, for example *Directory of Women's Non-Governmental Organizations in Russia and NIS* (1999), and *Directory of Women's Organizations and Initiatives in Poland* (1995). Graham and Regulska (1997) report that at least fifty women's NGOs has sprung up in Hungary since 1989, and according to Daskalova (2000), thirty-five women's NGOs had been launched in Bulgaria by 1995.

A glance at the names of many of the NGOs will prove that many of them have nothing to do with women's issues per se. The articulation of women's rights within post-communist discourse is still new. The test will be to see how the gender and women's studies programs, the NGOs that do support women's rights, the conferences, and the forums translate into empowerment. For these organizations and efforts to be meaningful, they must translate into action — influencing policy-making, protecting

existing legislation, and electing pro-women candidates. Links to international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union, both which have strong records on the issue of gender equality, helps legitimize local movements. The global village is and should be the arena for women's rights and post-communist women now have the opportunity and the resources to become part of that village.

Conclusion

Communism, at least, promised to liberate women through increased opportunities in education, employment, and political representation. It failed, because it failed to eliminate patriarchy. Unfortunately, the introduction of the market economy and democracy holds no such promise. The communist state had a direct relationship with women in terms of social policies. Women experienced a dual patriarchy; private patriarchy in the domestic domain and public patriarchy in civil life. The *Party*, which defined the role of women, promoted patriarchy disguised as equality. Pro-natalist and anti-natalist policies reflected demographic and labor force needs. Social policies reinforced women's roles in the domestic domain as housekeepers responsible also for child care. The communist governments alternatively postponed or ignored answering the question of women's real equality at work and at home (Eisenstein, 1996).

Currently, many of the post-communist states are doing little to address women's interests. Most are providing legal rights, which are easily being ignored.[13] In the areas of employment, political representation, and reproductive rights, women have lost ground while their governments seem to be hoping that the "women's question" will be solved later, when economic and political stability have been achieved. Women's rights and women's incorporation into the new democracies, however, need to be an integral part of the transition, not an afterthought.

Hope for the future may lie in the growing momentum of the gender and women's studies programs, and women's organizations. Much work remains to be done, but it does appear that the door has opened and many post-communist women are willing and able to take "two steps forward".

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[13] As of January 2000 all of the countries under discussion have ratified *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (UN, 2000). Gender equality is legally guaranteed in Hungary (Art. 66.1), Russia (Art. 19.3), Bulgaria (Art. 6.2), and Lithuania (Art. 29) (Scheppele, 1995: 66).

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