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Social Problems and Women´s Politics in Eastern Europe - Socialist, Feminist and Neo-Liberal Perspectives

***Sabine Hering**, University of Siegen*

The post-1989 transition from state socialism to capitalism and democracy has produced winners and losers.[1] There is no doubt that women in Eastern Europe find themselves mainly among the loser. Irrespective of variations in economic and political development, birth-rates dramatically dropped in all countries of the former 'Eastern Bloc', while at the same time female unemployment increased significantly.[2] Statistics disclose the reasons behind this development. They reveal a sharp decline in the number of places available in day nurseries for children, and an escalation of gender-specific segregation in the labour market. Both developments have contributed to a 'feminisation of poverty' which many Eastern European authorities accept as an inevitable consequence of modernisation.[3]

Considering these findings we have to ask if state socialism and its social provisions offered - perhaps – better conditions for women, at least for working mothers. But did socialism really solve the 'female question' as August Bebel[4] has predicted? Did it abolish the suppression of women and promoted their rights? This was definitely not the case. Although gender equality was seen as an important goal in many socialist societies, and childcare and medical care were free, the countries of the Eastern Bloc were a far away from being the 'promised land' for women.

There are significant gaps in our understanding of the implementation of gender equality in the Soviet satellite states, of social security and self-determination for women under socialist rule, and of their protection against discrimination and violence.[5] So far, findings mainly reveal disparities and contradictions. While in some countries issues like childcare or female employment were dealt within a highly progressive way, women in other countries clearly missed out. The advantages and disadvantages of working and raising children in a socialist society did not affect all women in the same way. Furthermore, it is important to note that many of the official statements concerning women´s rights and security under state socialism

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[1] The author adopts the term (real) 'socialism' rather than 'communism' to describe the political regimes of the countries of the Eastern Bloc.

[2] Since 1989, social security for women and their prospects on the labour market have deteriorated (e.g. Firlin-Fesnak 1998 and Schwarcz 2003).

[3] These findings play into the hands of those who are apologetic of the 'ancien regime' who wish to return to the 'good old days' of state socialism (cf. Richter 1999).

[4] cf. Bebel 1904 [1879].

[5] In their 'Digital Handbook of Russian and Eastern-Europe Women- and Gender-History' (Digitales Handbuch zur Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte Russlands und Osteuropas') Carmen Scheides and Natali Stegmanns provide a good overview of literature on these topics.

did not correspond with reality. Critical comments on deficiencies in social policies were not published - or even discussed. Particularly the fact, that the attempt to solve the social question produced numerous new and unresolvable problems, was not acknowledged.[6]

1 1989 – A new start or lost in transition?

Even among researchers there is no general agreement concerning the gains and losses experienced by Eastern European women as a result of the breakdown of the socialist regimes and the subsequent period of transition. Much of the existing research in Women's and Gender Studies focuses on necessary changes in the 'socialist' domestic sphere: in private life, social security, and (sexual) self-determination. Advocates of socialist women's politics mostly dismiss this new emphasis on 'the private' as it does not correspond to their idea of promoting gender equality through governmental policy. Vice versa the advantages women in the Eastern bloc had especially through the legal guidelines concerning the compatibility of family and occupation fade into the background of feminist criticism. Female researchers are regarding rather the general lack of freedom – accompanied by (not sanctioned) domestic violence and the partially striking paternalism in the area of population policy.

Thus, it does surprise that academic research has become (once again) a vehicle for political opinion. Between 1945 and 1990 women's politics in Eastern Europe were characterised by a firm belief in the vital role of the state as the main actor in the field of the 'social question'. Today, civil society organisations, and not primarily the state, are considered responsible for the well-being of all members of society, and of women in particular. It seems that rather than politicising the private sphere, 'the political' becomes re-privatized - drifting into the socio-cultural realm of informal contacts and exchanges.[7] The contemporary feminist´s emphasis on civil society is not acceptable for many women in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc who have experienced the transition. They feel that this perspective relates to an essentially Western rather than 'universal' experience and does not fit into the gendered particularities of Eastern European societies. Therefore, feminist methods advocated by gender activists from the West appear of limited practical value to women in the East[8] who refuse to be 'forced into the straightjacket of Western thought patterns'.[9] They are sure that prejudice and patronising are not limited to their former societies. They feel discriminated, because many of the positive experiences of women in the East – in particular those relating to the achievements of socialist societies - are consistently devalued by their Western contemporaries. But what were these achievements with regard to gender equality, and how did they relate to socialist policies?

2 Cost and benefits of the social state for the 'woman under socialism'

Until 1989, social policies in Eastern Europe were based on the model of the Soviet Union but they were equally influenced by the more particular traditions of the various communist parties. Therefore, the principle of 'equality' – as the most fundamental principle of the socialist state – found its expression in different policies, including the special regional gender relations. Nevertheless, the basic principle was the idea of equality. The consequences of equal rights for women and men in Bulgaria, for example, is described by Kristina Popova as

[6] cf. Hübner et al. 2002.

[7] cf. the criticism of Nancy Fraser concerning the neglect of categories of political economy in feminist research.

[8] Wakounig 2003, p. 8.

[9] Stegmann 2002, p. 932.

follows: "As the law (of equal rights), that was decreed in 1944, was the foundation for the reorganisation of gender relations by the government, it made further feministic debates obsolete. As a result, no public discourse on gender relations emerged. On the contrary, 'communication about sex and gender was replaced by an officially propagandised 'sexlessness' which concealed an uneven distribution of social risks that would have required targeted action".[10]

Few attempts were made to bridge the emerging gap between de jure and de facto equality in areas where it would have been essential. Instead, socialism created new forms of inequality as e.g. discrimination against women intersected with occupational privilege.[11] Considerable gaps in the social safety net for women remained, some of these resulting from financial constraints whereas others were used as tools for systematic social exclusion, mainly against members of ethnic minorities and 'antisocial elements' such as prostitutes.[12]

Women's politics were caught in between requirements of reproduction and demands of economic growth. Often related to changing economic trends, this problem exist in various political regimes and are by no means limited to the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. However, in contrast to other political systems, socialist regimes attempted to reconcile the conflicting demands of demographic and economic policies in their endeavours of creating a 'new human being'. In regards to the biopolitical goals, both, the increase of birth rate and the exclusion of the 'asocial', were of vital importance. The combination of increasing birth rates and the exclusion of 'antisocial elements' from society (praised as the creation of a 'socialist mankind') required particular efforts especially from women. Their roles in childbirth, child-rearing, and education were considered as complementary to the policies of exclusion drawn up by the Eastern European governments.

Like in the case of other totalitarian regimes, this attempt of recreating humankind and the related population policies (such as measures to stimulate third births[13]) fortunately failed. It is important to note, however, that some of the measures implemented to this purpose denied human dignity and, in some cases, even amounted to attacks on physical integrity.[14]

With regard to the benefits of the socialist state for women in Eastern Europe, governmental support for families included in a professional relief system was of fundamental importance.[15] Major investments in childcare and education made it possible for up to 90% of the female population to take up regular employment. At the same time, the relative value of marriage as a social institution declined in many socialist societies, and it became less important whether

[10] Popova 2003, p. 218.

[11] Under socialism, peasant women had good reasons to envy their factory-based sisters; in the 'Workers´ and Peasants´ State' GDR factory workers found themselves in a privileged position when compared to peasants, cf. Hering/Waaldijk 2006, p. 62ff.

[12] cf. Korzilius 2005

[13] cf. Brunnbauer 2005, p. 274 ff.

[14] This is for example shown in the film „Experiment 770" which gives evidence to cruel practices to exclude handicapped children in Romania. In several Eastern European countries, Romani women were confronted with degrading treatment in the health care system, and violent abuse such as coerced sterilization (Council of Europe and EUMC, 2003), see also Kruckenberg 2010.

[15] See Menschik/Leopold (1974) for such measures with regard to the GDR (pp. 25).

children were born in or outside of marriage.[16] All this suggests that women could lead more independent lives and had a wider range of work-life choices than they had had before. On the other hand, neither society nor government expected men to step up their efforts in child-rearing and housework.[17] Statistics on the division of housework among adult men and women show that many of the patriarchal traditions governing the private sphere remained unchanged. Whereas issues such as domestic violence existed on both sides of the Iron Curtain, it appears as if women on its Eastern side - due to their economic independence and a legal framework that facilitated divorce - had better conditions to leave abusive relationships than their sisters in the West. The questions remains, however, how many women actually took advantage of this.[18]

Increasing numbers of women in formal employment were accompanied by a significant diversification of female career choices. Since the 1970s, governments in East and West tried to raise the level of the participation of women in male dominated sectors of the labour market. As it turned out, many socialist regimes were extremely successful in this regard. In the GDR, women accounted for 46 percent of enrolments in mathematics and natural sciences, 25 percent in engineering, and 66 percent in economics.[19] Nevertheless, there was an occupational segregation or gender-related jobs on the labour market. According to Nickel, a certain 'differentiation between the sexes' prevailed – not the least with regard to high-ranking positions.[20] Whereas gender equality seemed to be within reach at the entry level, many of the top positions in politics and administration were given to men only, a fact hard to bear for many equally qualified women. [21]

Notwithstanding that gender (in)equality on the labour market is only one aspect of the female life-conditions in state socialism, it also lends to the question of social change administered through state authorities. It shows that despite substantial progress in law and social policy, a certain lack of management made many of the gendered particularities of Eastern European societies unchanged. "Along the idea of loudly propagandised gender equality 'man' could 'naturally' hang on to the traditional split of labour between the sexes and deliberately fail to see the differences and the imbalance of power between women and men."[22] Social change would have required changes in the 'infrastructure' of these societies, which not have been realized. As a result, successful policies promoting gender-equality on one side covered-up the persistent inequality in other social segments.

3 'Women under Neo-Liberalism'

Since the turn over in 1989, the countries of the former Eastern Bloc have experienced sweeping changes. The transition to democracy and market economy gave rise to an

[16] cf. Brunnbauer 2005; Kassabova 2007.

[17] cf. Menschik/Leopold 1974, p. 141ff.; Brunnbauer 2005, p. 273; Popova 2003, p. 319; Wakounig 2003; p. 205.

[18] Most of the reports on domestic violence refer to the period after 1989 – cf. inter alia Bandura 2003.

[19] cf. Nickel 1993, p. 233 ff. However, it remains unclear whether these figures were also owed to 'managed choices'.

[20] ibid., p. 242.

[21] cf. Alice Zadek, in: Hering/Lützenkirchen 1995, p. 67-78.

[22] Nickel 1993, p. 234.

increasing segmentation of social spheres, with newly emerging divides within and across gender boundaries.

Researchers in the field of Women and Gender Studies were among the beneficiaries of the transition period, as the academic freedom of the post 1990 years opened up wider international debates and evoked a (re)discovery of gender-related topics.[23] The fact that numerous research institutes were founded in this era shows accumulated demands but also a high level of more or less until 1989 'unused' intellectual potential.

However, research reports produced in the newly established centres for Gender Studies, gave evidence to the many losses suffered by women as a result of the transition process. The liberalised labour markets turned former 'privileges' (such as extensive maternity leaves and a lower retirement age) into disadvantage against female applicants.[24] The Russian historian Iskra Schwarcz describes the difficult situation of many women in the early 1990s as following: 'Life became increasingly difficult not merely because the costs of living… Also childcare facilities – which had previously been open to mothers free of charge – closed or became fee-based. Additional government cuts further exacerbated an already difficult situation. Many women sought to do what they could, even if this involved illegal acts such as prostitution or emigration through marriage.'[25]

Reports of this kind remind us, that the situation of many European women around 1900 was similar. They also had to cope with all social risks like illness, pregnancy, unemployment and old age without any social security.[26] The security funds were only valid for male worker. At the turn of the twentieth century these conditions prevailed throughout all industrialised countries. There existed no nation offering efficient live conditions for the majority of the female population and there were no laws against discrimination.

Fortunately, in the year 2011 this has changed substantially, and many of the achievements listed above have become an integral part of what we understand as a decent human life. Today, women in East and West know that social security and equality are standards to be called upon, and that there is – and has been – a better life for them to achieve. But the ever-widening gap of living standards between women in East and West shows that most Eastern European women do not have much to gain from this new era of neoliberalism, because the new system promises chances which many of them cannot realise.

Considering these facts it becomes obvious that such discrepancies between East and West cannot be accepted, and that they are by no means an inevitable consequence of modernisation. Social security and economic independence, compatibility of family and work, protection from discrimination and violence – these are no utopian claims. Essential parts of an indispensible safety net for women in Western Europe cannot be beyond reach for their sisters in the East. Otherwise, we will we return to living in increasingly divided realities as we did before. Thus, attempts to obscure this simple truth, and to re-established double standards require our utmost attention and resistance.

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[23] Scholarships programmes from the United States of America and European research networks such as ATHENA (Advanced Thematic Network of Women's Studies in Europe) played an important role in this.

[24] Augustynowicz 2003, p. 105

[25] Schwarcz 2003, p. 48f.

[26] cf. Lily Braun 1901.

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Author´s Address:
Sabine Hering
University of Siegen
Fakultät II (Bildung/Architektur/Künste)
Adolf-Reichwein-Straße 2
57068 Siegen
Germany
Tel: ++ 49 271 740 4245
Email: Hering@paedagogik.uni-siegen.de