

after the fall: east european women since the collapse of state socialism

Over a decade ago, the collapse of state socialism in Eastern and Central Europe liberated the forces of capitalism and democracy. Did its collapse also liberate women?



In the Jiu Valley, traditional prohibitions against women working in the mines were relaxed during state-mandated industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s. But when the state began closing mines in 1996, women were among the first to be laid off. The women still working in the mines are typically single mothers who hold surface jobs, such as the lamp warehouse administrator shown here.

The photo series appearing with this article depicts the varied life circumstances of Romanian women after the fall of state socialism in the 1990s. It is drawn from a study by Gabriel Dragomir of how the decline of collectivization and industry affected Romanian women at work, in the home and in public life. All photographs and captions by Gabriel Dragomir.



Most workers in the pastry department of this bread factory are poorly paid women. Two years ago, when the factory was bought by a Hungarian company, 50 percent of the employees were fired.

According to the mainstream media, the Cold War is over, and the West won. Many assume that the victory is not theirs alone since East Europeans, not least East European women, now have access to capitalism and democracy. As capitalist enterprises took over, female workers were to enjoy new economic opportunities and consumer choices. As democratic states took hold, female citizens were to gain new political freedom and juridical protection.

Have these expectations been met? Yes and no. Although some women thrived amidst these new opportunities, most women encountered new hardship and discrimination. Just as the rise of state socialism failed to emancipate women 50 years ago, its fall has not liberated them either. Understanding why illuminates the complexities of East European women's lives and the forces shaping them.

why didn't state socialism emancipate women?

"The socialist state shall ensure that conditions are created everywhere that enable women increasingly to live up to their equal status at work and in vocational education and to reconcile even more successfully their occupational activities with the duties they have to fulfill as mothers and within the family,"

—East German Labor Code of 1977

The societies of Eastern and Central Europe are a diverse lot; they never constituted a homogenous "bloc." Yet, despite their religious, ethnic, and cultural differences, countries like Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania did share a common economic and political system. And women made considerable gains in this system. Beginning in the 1950s, women's presence in the public arena increased dramatically as they entered the labor force en masse. By the 1980s, 70-90 percent of women worked outside the home in many kinds of jobs. Although the image of the female tractor driver was more myth than reality, women made significant inroads into traditionally male fields like manufacturing, medicine and law. By the 1970s, the percentage of women in universities actually exceeded that of men.

Women's participation in the political arena also increased. Most countries instituted quotas requiring that women occupy 20-30 percent of state and parliamentary positions. State policies frequently benefited women. Although they varied by country, socialist welfare systems included full employment

guarantees, price subsidies and socialized services. These provisions never produced a "classless society" as promised, but they did serve as a safety net to protect particularly vulnerable groups, like single mothers, from falling into abject poverty. Many countries supplemented these benefits with universal family allowances, child support enforcement and generous maternity leave grants. For instance, Hungarian mothers were entitled to three years of paid child care leave—with their jobs guaranteed upon completion of leave.

Women's massive influx into the labor force was not, however, entirely by choice; wages were set so low that few families could subsist on only one income. Female workers were paid 25-35 percent less than their male counterparts. As women started working outside the home, jobs became segregated by sex—both within and among industries. The state's control over economic planning enabled it to draw women into and out of certain economic sectors when necessary. Gail Kligman has shown that the Romanian state used reproductive policy in a similar way, outlawing abortion and restricting access to birth control when it decided that a higher birth rate was desirable. Since women were almost absent from the upper echelons of the Communist party, high-ranking male officials made most of these decisions.

Life was not much more egalitarian on the home front, despite official ideology. Studies in which research subjects kept detailed diaries of their activities revealed that a traditional division of labor persisted in the household as women remained responsible for domestic upkeep. Decades before the term was coined in the West, East European women experienced the "double burden," theirs made particularly onerous by chronic food shortages and cramped living arrangements. Because of state control of speech, many issues, such as domestic violence and alcoholism, rarely made it on to the public agenda.

Under state socialism, women achieved unparalleled economic inclusion, political incorporation and access to welfare and child care benefits. But women were also excluded from the most lucrative economic and political positions, even while they were expected to work both inside and outside the home. Both outcomes reflected the way state socialism operated. When it was in the state's interest to promote gender equality, it did; when it was in the state's interest to maintain gender hierarchies, it enforced them. Thus, with the collapse of the socialist state, many East Europeans believed that the source of gender inequality would also disappear.



Two women of Sancrai (on the right) negotiate an exchange of goose feathers for pans and blankets offered by traveling traders. The lack of cash makes barter the most common form of economic exchange in Sancrai.

the invisible hand of inequality

"I was one of the first to lose my job in November 1990... It's better for your kids, they said. You can fetch coal to heat for them in the mornings and make school lunches in peace. How hypocritical! With four children, every employer will think: No thanks. Now I can do any kind of crap job: cleaning, scrubbing, painting windows, mending fences, shoveling rubble. The main thing is not to become a case for social security. If that happens, I'll turn on the gas and kill all of us."

—Monika Lopez, 35-year-old married mother of four from the former East Germany, quoted by Barbara Einhorn in *Cinderella Goes to Market*

Under state socialism, the state used women's labor to serve its own ends. According to liberal ideology, the market rewards workers for their skills and accords them the opportunity to forge their own destinies. So perhaps women would finally be rewarded for their skills.

But reality proved otherwise. From the onset, economic restructuring had adverse effects on women. In only a decade, unemployment rates soared from less than 1 percent to over 13 percent across the region. Women lost their jobs at higher rates than men. According to Éva Fodor, women constitute 50-70 percent of the unemployed in all countries except Hungary. Some analysts attributed these patterns to the logic of the market: If women lost their jobs at higher rates than men, it must be because their skills were less marketable. Yet this reasoning only goes so far. Within the same industries, women lost their jobs more often than men did. And among those with similar skill levels, women were more likely to lose their jobs. For instance, in Hungary 63 percent of those laid off from non-manual, semi-skilled positions were women.

Accompanying the rise in unemployment rates was a sharp decline in wages. Here, too, women suffered more than men, for two reasons. First, women tend to be employed in the public sector and men in the private sector. Although public-sector employment is more stable, it pays less than private-sector work. Second, women in the private sector tend to hold service jobs, in areas such as household help, health provision or the food industry, which are poorly paid with few benefits. Across the region, the percentage of women employed in service-sector jobs has increased dramatically; in some countries it has more than doubled. Again, it is inaccurate to interpret women's overrepresentation in the service sector as simply rational market allocation—many service-sector workers are highly educated, with extensive employment histories and proficiency in multiple languages. Thus, it was not simply women's lack of skills that forced them into service-sector jobs.

Clearly, something more was at work. Public opinion surveys provide a clue as to what it might be: Across the region, female workers report encountering new forms of discrimination and facing stereotypes that they are less reliable and less in need of income than men. These stereotypes justify discrimination against female employees. Cases of sexual harassment are also on the rise, making national news and spawning public debate in the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Scientific research corroborates these reports. In one of the only studies of its kind, Elizabeth Rudd interviewed 41 couples in the former East Germany about work and family. They reported that their workplaces had become less social and more competitive since the fall of state socialism. Women confronted new obstacles at work because the possibility that they may become mothers impedes their ability to land and keep jobs. State support of the family also shifted in ways that women and men felt devalued their familial responsibilities and made it more difficult to combine work and family.

the feminization of poverty

"This is how they always said it worked under capitalism. Nobody would care for the poor."

—Mária Tóth, middle-aged Hungarian welfare recipient

Marketization sent shock waves across the region. With time, extreme disparities in income and wealth surfaced. Some East Europeans accumulated huge sums of money. The winners included entrepreneurs, high-level professionals and former members of the socialist elite who traded their political connections for wealth. Yet, few women benefited. The number of female CEOs is minuscule, and the percentage of female entrepreneurs rarely exceeds 10 percent. With limited possibilities of entering this elite class on their own, many women have done so as wives. Hungarian social scientists Katalin Kovács and Monika Váradi interviewed such women and found that they must live up to new beauty ideals—thus dividing their time among spa treatments, tanning salons and appointments with personal trainers. For them, conspicuous consumption has become a way of life.

Although the new elites may be the most visible social layer—particularly for the media and for tourists visiting Prague or Budapest—they are not the majority. Less visible but far more numerous are those East Europeans who once enjoyed stable working-class (and even middle-class) lives but slipped into poverty in the last decade. They include clerical workers, industrial laborers and manual workers who can no longer make ends meet. In Hungary and Poland, roughly



Four generations of women occupy this home in Northern Transylvania. As jobs become scarce, men increasingly seek work outside the community and women redirect their attention from earning wages to managing a household.

15 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line; an additional 15 percent lives just above the poverty line. Women are overrepresented among the new poor. In part, this is due to their higher rates of unemployment and lower wages. It is also related to their responsibilities for childrearing. Many women found they were one divorce or one pregnancy away from a slide into poverty. Poverty rates for single parents have soared: In the Czech Republic and Hungary they doubled, while in Poland they tripled since the early 1990s. Divorced women now encounter new difficulties securing child support—socialist firms had garnished fathers' wages, but few private firms have instituted such practices. With the end of subsidized goods and services, child care costs skyrocketed. Some women now find themselves increasingly dependent on a male wage. Others find themselves drawn into the "informal economy," unregulated and sometimes illegal work, which, although unstable and dangerous, accords them a livable wage. Still others find themselves doing without basic necessities, like shelter or electricity, to make ends meet.

There are many ways to interpret this rise in poverty. In the mid-1990s, I studied how Hungarian welfare workers understood and treated poverty during and after state socialism. I discovered a marked change. Relatively few women were poor in the socialist era, yet welfare workers tended to attribute poverty then to the failure of state policy. By the 1990s, the number of poor women had increased dramatically, yet welfare workers held individualistic explanations for poverty, deeming the poor lazy and disorderly. These assumptions extend beyond welfare offices: In a recent survey, most Czechs and Hungarians claimed that economic outcomes depend on one's talent, lifestyle and values. Despite the evident impoverishment of so many, market ideology holds sway over many East Europeans.

democracy in public life

"Only three out of the repeatedly persecuted dissident women are today members of the Federal Assembly. Two of them have no intention of running in the next election. Why is it that those women who had been doing the gray, routine, sometimes even dirty work at the duplicating machines, who translated texts, copied political essays and manuscripts which later found their way into samizdat or exile editions, are no longer active in political life?"

—Jirina Siklova, Czech activist and former signatory of Charter 77

While some analysts of Eastern Europe were not surprised by the realities of capitalism, most of them expected great things from democratization. Indeed, the end of one-party

rule has offered valuable resources to East Europeans. They now have access to basic citizenship rights like freedom of speech, assembly and religious affiliation. Almost overnight, there was more than one party in town. In fact, there seemed to be a party for everyone as hundreds of new political organizations sprouted up in the 1990s. The governments they formed successfully revised legal systems and drafted constitutions granting citizens new juridical protection. The political possibilities emanating from these changes seemed limitless.

With time, the limitations of democratic institutions surfaced. A distinct form of homogeneity began to characterize the political arena: Women progressively disappeared from elected office. With the end of political quotas, the percentage of women in parliamentary positions plummeted to record lows of less than 10 percent. This disappearing trick was even more pronounced at the upper echelons of these governments, leading some analysts to deem them "male democracies." This label also applies to the political discourse produced by these states. Major political parties tend to share increasingly anti-feminist, anti-poor, and anti-gypsy sentiments—leaving many members of these groups alienated from the political process. Yet, political alienation extends beyond these groups: While over 85 percent of East Europeans voted in the first free elections after 1989, voter turnout has dropped to record lows of 50-70 percent since the mid-1990s.

The actual policies enacted by these democratic governments included both gains and losses for women. East European women now enjoy a series of new rights. The first change made by the post-Ceausescu government in Romania was to legalize abortion. In 1993, the Czech government expanded the scope of family benefits and extended paid maternity leave. In Poland, a state-sponsored campaign against family violence helped educate the population about domestic abuse. And in Hungary the constitutional court issued several rulings that strengthened the enforcement of equal pay laws.

At the same time, women also lost important entitlements and rights. In 1995, the Hungarian government passed restrictive welfare reform legislation that abolished universal family allowances and maternity leave. Although parts of this legislation were repealed in 1999, the government enacted new rules that subjected applicants to investigations of their lifestyles and childrearing practices—investigations akin to those once used in the U.S. welfare state, such as searches of clients' flats and examinations of their children's school attendance. In 1993, the Polish government passed a restrictive abortion law. From 1992-1999, the number of legal abortions dropped from 11,700 to 151. Women's groups estimate that over 200,000 illegal abortions are performed each year in Poland.



Ritual bread for Saturday liturgy must be prepared by an aged widow because she is untouched by men and pure. In Sancrai village, however, almost half of the households are now inhabited by aged widows, many of whom live just above the poverty line.

weathering the storm of reform

"In Hungary there are many alcoholics because we are such a poor country. Not like the U.S. We drink because we are so miserable... This is worse since the system changed because more people are poor and very miserable."

—Judit Barna, Hungarian social worker

These broad social trends reveal a great deal about the position of women under postsocialism, but key questions remain: How are women reorganizing their lives to meet the demands placed on them? How are they making sense of these shifts?

Families are changing. In countries like the former East Germany and the Czech Republic, birth rates plummeted. In countries like Poland and Romania, divorce rates increased. And in countries like Hungary, illegitimacy rates skyrocketed as more women bore children out of wedlock. Across the region, time-

budget studies indicate that the domestic division of labor actually became more inequitable since the 1980s: Men now spend more time working outside the home, while women devote more time to work within the home. This pattern has led some social scientists to predict the (re)emergence of a traditional family form within two-parent households where men are responsible for breadwinning and women for domestic upkeep.

The transition has taken its emotional toll. Mental health surveys found that the incidence of psychological disorders increased across the region. Hungarian researchers discovered that 38 percent of the population complained of "neurotic disorders" in 1995—as compared to 23 percent in 1983. Much of this increase may be due to a decline in women's emotional well-being. Since 1990, the number of Hungarian women seeking help for depression rose by 50 percent, while that of men remained the same. This does not imply that men had an easy time of it. The same studies revealed that alcoholism rates soared after the 1980s; over two-thirds of new alcoholics are men.

Sociologists have only begun to examine women's interpretations of the changes occurring around them. For example, I discovered that most poor women found their marginal status to be unfamiliar and even perplexing. They often responded to it through nostalgia—by recalling a time when they felt less vulnerable or when the source of their vulnerability seemed more transparent. Studies in Polish and Hungarian factories uncovered a similar pattern: female workers bemoaned their loss of economic security and belonging and grappled with it by romanticizing the past.

These responses reveal a central dilemma facing East European women. They have moved between "isms"—from

state socialism to capitalism. Although both systems promised to liberate them, neither one delivered on its promises. But they failed to deliver for different reasons. State socialism relied on the strong regulation of the economy, politics and the family; it shaped inequality in the state's interest. The regulation of these institutions did facilitate women's economic inclusion, political participation and social security, but it also robbed women of political rights, civil liberties and personal choices. As capitalist democracy loosened the regulatory grip of the state, some women gained economic flexibility, market opportunities and democratic freedoms. Yet women also encountered new economic insecurities, unchecked sexual



Tradition encourages women to stay behind or follow men. In church, women sit close to the doors, men close to the altar.



discrimination and political marginalization. Herein lies the irony of the transition story: The gains women made under state socialism may have come back to haunt them. The labor laws that ensured women's incorporation into the workforce are now considered distortions of the free market; the welfare provisions that allowed women to combine work and family now underlie their dismissals as "unreliable" workers; and the quotas that guaranteed women's political participation now undermine their legitimacy as voters and candidates.

Out of this irony of liberation emerges a larger moral: Deregulation can be just as harmful to women as overregulation. Although the inequalities of the former seem less obvious than those of the latter, they are nonetheless damaging. Clearly, Western capitalist democracy differs from the East European variant—it has had more time to develop checks and balances. East Europeans assumed that the state was responsible for most social problems, so they veered in the opposite direction, eliminating even the most constructive forms of regulation. Yet, when left to their own devices, democratic and market institutions foster distinct forms of gender inequality. These inequalities are not beyond redress; they can be controlled, and even undermined, through careful regulation. Achieving this in a way that balances women's social protection, civil rights and personal well-being will be a key challenge for East Europeans and Westerners in the years to come. ■

recommended resources

Burawoy, Michael and Katherine Verdery, eds. *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999. Ethnographic studies that document different aspects of the postsocialist transition in Russia, Romania, Hungary and Poland.

Einhorn, Barbara. *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender, and Women's Movements in East Central Europe*. London: Verso, 1993. Overview of the status of women in Eastern Europe at the early stages of the transition period.

Fodor, Éva. "Gender in Transition: Unemployment in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia." *East European Politics and Societies* 11 (1997): 783-800. Statistical analysis of trends in female unemployment in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

Funk, Nanette and Magda Mueller, eds. *Gender Politics of Post-Communism*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Collection of essays, written mainly by East European women, that describes the positive and negative aspects of the collapse of state socialism for women.

Gal, Susan and Gail Kligman, eds. *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. Collection of empirical studies, many of which were conducted by East European women, that reveals how gender roles are changing in everyday life.

Haney, Lynne. *Inventing the Needy: Gender and the Politics of Welfare in Hungary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Historical and ethnographic study of changes in welfare policies and practices in Hungary from the inception of state socialism to the mid-1990s.

Kligman, Gail. *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Historical study of the politics of reproduction in socialist and post-socialist Romania.

Rudd, Elizabeth. "Reconceptualizing Gender in Postsocialist Transformation." *Gender & Society*, 14 (2000): 517-539. Interview study that analyzes how work and family have changed for couples in the former East Germany.