Czech women in transition

Despite a contracting economy from 1989 to 1991, labor force participation of Czech women remains high; earnings needs, a high divorce rate, and a growing proportion of families headed by women explain the very modest decline in women's participation

Marianne A. Ferber

During the two decades of its independence (1918–38), the Republic of Czechoslovakia was a liberal democracy and had an industrialized economy (particularly in the section that now constitutes the Czech Republic) roughly on a par with those of Western European countries. While by no means equal to that of men, the status of Czech women was better than in most other advanced industrialized countries at the time.[1] Women constituted about one-third of the labor force, they had the right to vote and the right to be elected to public office, and they were politically very active. The notion of special protection for women had been quickly rejected,[2] and there was a spirited feminist movement. But the liberal democratic Czechoslovak Republic came to an abrupt end at Munich in 1938.

After the Nazi occupation and World War II, the Communists received a plurality in the 1946 election and took over the government in 1948. Through the subsequent 40 years of Communist domination, women made further progress in some respects. Their legal and political status was, at least formally, equal to that of men. More women received higher degrees, particularly in previously male-dominated fields,[3] and their labor force participation rose dramatically, so that by 1989, women made up 47 percent of the labor force.[4] Further, women's representation in some nontraditional fields, such as scientific research and the construction industry, increased substantially.[5] There is even some evidence that women received greater respect and shared power more equally within the family.[6]

Progress, however, was very uneven and was tainted by its association with an ideology that was eventually to be despised by the vast majority of the people. Also, the price of this progress was high, and the gains made came to be viewed not as accomplishments, but as "forced emancipation." Now, with the downfall of communism, women may be willing to relinquish many of the gains they have made and return to a more traditional role.

Women's roles under communism

The founding fathers of communism advocated that women should share, as much as possible, in what was, under capitalism, a man's world. In an economy with more or less constant labor shortages, no conflict arose between this goal and furthering the interests of the Communist party. Hence, women were welcomed into the labor force. Nonetheless, the revolution in women's roles envisioned by the party remained incomplete. The main obstacle to the achievement of true equality was the failure on the part of party leaders to recognize that it could not be attained by women sharing in the world of men, without men sharing in the world of women. That Communist leaders viewed household work as mind-shriveling drudgery and "domestic slavery [that] crushes, strangles, stultifies, and degrades"[7] was certainly no spur to entering that world.

The issue was all the more urgent because almost no part-time jobs were available, so that virtually all employed women worked full time.[8]

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Also, there were few of the household appliances and little of the convenience shopping that were increasingly taken for granted in wealthy market economies. The Communist solution to this dilemma was to advocate the socialization of housework. Unfortunately, serious difficulties stood in the way of realizing this solution.

First, not all household obligations can be delegated. Someone must be in charge, decide on the budget, purchase goods, supervise the provision of services, and take care of the emergencies that inevitably arise. These would be expected to remain women's responsibilities. Second, to the extent that housework would be socialized, someone in the public sector would have to wipe children's noses, launder their diapers, tend to the infirm, wash the dishes, make the beds, and peel the potatoes. It turned out that men were no more anxious to do such work for low pay than they had been to do it at home for free.

Third, and perhaps most important, the socialization of housework required a substantial investment in the service sector of the economy. Although there was an increase in maternity benefits and day care for children aged 3 to 5 years[9] in the Soviet countries from the mid–1960's on, when these countries became concerned about their low birthrates, in general, very low priority was assigned to expenditures that would reduce housework. These expenditures were always postponed, so that more urgent problems could be solved first.[10]

The picture that emerges is all of a piece: officially, communism espoused equality for women in the labor market and in society, but in practice, it virtually ignored the fact that their role in the household often made this equality meaningless.[11] The failure to emphasize, or even consider, the role of men in the household became all the more important when concern with the low birthrate came to the fore. All the provisions to encourage and facilitate child rearing focused exclusively on the role of the mother. The fact that special privileges for mothers put women at a disadvantage in the labor market, particularly in achieving responsible, higher level positions, was ignored.

The end result was that women in Czechoslovakia were overworked and experienced stress because of conflicts among their jobs, their potential participation in political affairs, and their family obligations. For the most part, they minimized these conflicts by remaining in low-level jobs—often in poorly paid, traditionally female occupations—and by not taking part in political affairs, while continuing to have few children.[12] Not surprisingly, considerable vertical as well as occupational segregation existed in the labor market,[13] and a substantial earnings gap of about 30 percent persisted between men and women.

By the time the end came in 1989, women appeared to have been thoroughly disillusioned with the political process and ready to reject the whole notion of equality and economic independence as part of a failed experiment of the Communist regime.[14] Ironically, however, one part of the old ideology they did not reject was the negative view of Western feminism, which had been condemned as reactionary, especially after 1968.[15] As a result, many women are ready to "throw out the baby with the bath water."

The "sandpaper" transition[16]

While there was much jubilation and good feeling during the "velvet revolution of 1989," today a good deal of bitterness and cynicism permeate the thinking and writing in the country in general and on women's issues in particular. The emancipation of women and their mass participation in the labor market are viewed as having been decided by the State, without any involvement by women themselves. At the same time, their formal equality is viewed as having been motivated by the needs of the economy, not by a genuine desire to improve the lot of women.[17] As one commentator put it, these considerations "are not presently seen as top priority concerns by most people."[18]

Similarly, many women suspect that expectations of rising unemployment are likely to motivate those who now want them to go back into the home. Even so, they often appear to be willing to accept the antifeminist ideology of these advocates of women's traditional role.[19] In the 1990 election campaign, "representatives of all political parties agreed that a way should be found for women to care for their small children at home."[20]

The Movement for the Equal Status of Women in Bohemia and Moravia, the successor to the officially sponsored Czech Union of Women, was tainted by its affiliation with the former Communist regime. It did not even last through its first year. Nor have women's organizations founded after 1989 attracted much support. Further, most members of women's organizations deny that they are feminists and emphasize the need to recognize women's distinctive features.[21]

In general, feminist concerns are getting little attention and less sympathy. No doubt, this is in part because they are currently overshadowed by such urgent concerns as the breakup of the country in January of 1993, the rising cost of living, the decline in real wages,[22] and serious widespread pollution. Other contributing factors are hostility on the part of conservatives and, as noted above, the lingering effects of Communist propaganda against "elitist bourgeois feminism."

It is not uncommon to find unquestioning acceptance of unproven, tired charges blaming all the evils of the world on the high employment rate of women. Among these is the charge of having fostered the "underdevelopment of emotional, moral and ethical relations among children and adults alike."[23] Women's responsibility for homemaking is accepted equally unquestioningly, even by critics who point out that such acceptance makes de jure equality meaningless in practice.[24] Consequently, there is a great deal of agreement that women's labor force participation has been too high in Czechoslovakia.[25]

At the same time, concern about the family is growing. Undoubtedly, this helps explain why maternity allowances were extended in 1990 to either parent who stays home to look after a child under 3 years of age or to tend to a sick child. The allowance, however, is a flat sum of about one-third the average wage for women, so that very few fathers can afford to avail themselves of these opportunities. Nonetheless, there may be some increase in the participation of fathers in such activities as shopping and picking up children at day care centers.[26]

Meanwhile, subsidies to day care for children 3 years and older are being cut drastically as a result of pressures to reduce comparatively high welfare expenditures,[27] and many of the very attractive buildings in which all-day kindergartens have been housed are being privatized. Unlike nurseries for younger children, which were viewed askance, these facilities were used almost universally and were very popular.[28] They will be sorely missed, all the more so because enterprises struggling to stay alive in the marketplace tend to shed workplace nurseries and crèches as unnecessary frills in an attempt to cut costs.[29]

Outlook

In view of the rejection of feminism, the negative attitudes toward women's employment, and the reduction in support for child care, one might expect a significant decline in women's labor force participation in the post-Communist Czech Republic. Nevertheless, "for most women their jobs and work outside the household have become a personal value,"[30] and pent-up demand for consumer goods, which had been in short supply for so long, is also likely to keep women in the labor force.

So far, women's labor force participation appears to have declined only modestly.[31] While it must be assumed that an 8-percent drop in overall employment between 1989 and 1991[32] was probably disproportionately higher among women, it is also reported that the decline was almost certainly overestimated, as a result of a failure to record the employment of many people in small private enterprises and in the informal economy.[33] The obvious explanation why so many women nonetheless remain in the labor force is threefold: the need for earnings under conditions of declining real income, a high divorce rate, and a growing proportion of families headed by women.[34] Also, the service sector, where women predominate, appears to be expanding in the developing market economy, thus providing opportunities for jobs, including part-time jobs, which have been scarce. Further, foreign language skills, more common among women than men, are increasingly in demand.

Still, it is widely anticipated that sharp declines in employment opportunities will greatly increase the number of female discouraged workers and eventually lead to their departure from the labor force.[35] Unemployment in the Czech Republic, however, appears to remain relatively modest, compared with that in most European countries, East or West. Even before the division of the country, the rate declined from 6.2 percent for men and 6.8 percent for women during the first quarter of 1992 to 4.8 percent for men and 5.4 percent for women in the first quarter of 1993,[36] and there is general agreement that unemployment is considerably worse in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic.

Thus, we encounter another irony: while in many ways bearing the brunt of privatization, women also appear to be saved by economic circumstances from rashly overreacting to "forced emancipation" and rejecting all the advances they have made. As long as their high level of education is not substantially reduced,[37] and they maintain their labor force participation, women are, after all, not likely to willingly exchange a dictatorial political regime for a traditional patriarchy. Instead, they may be expected to participate in the progress—albeit slow and unsteady—of women in much of the rest of the world. This is all the more true because a few voices[38] are already urging openmindedness toward the Western feminist movement and pointing out the risks of heedless abandonment of all of the programs introduced in Czechoslovakia during the last 40 years. □

Footnotes

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[1] Even then, there were substantial differences in the status of women in the two parts of the country, mainly because Slovakia was poorer and more agricultural than Bohemia and Moravia. (See Marie Čermáková, "Women in

Czechoslovakia and Their Reflection of Human Rights," Sociologicky Ustav ČSAV (Praha, ČSFR, undated); and Eva Hauser, "About the Perspectives of Feminism in Czechoslovakia" (Praha, Curriculum Centre and Library for Gender Studies, undated).)

[2] Hana Havelková, "A Few Prefeminist Thoughts," in Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, eds., *Gender Politics and Post-Communism* (New York, Routledge, 1993), pp. 62–73.

[3] In 1991, women constituted 69.1 percent of university graduates, compared with 20 percent in 1936. The comparable figures were 27.9 percent and 4.1 percent for graduates of technical colleges, 45.6 percent and 15 percent for graduates of agricultural colleges, and 80.9 percent and 38.6 percent for graduates of commercial colleges. (See Statistická Ročenka ČSSR, 1989; and Marie Čermáková, "Gender and the Employment of Higher Education Graduates in Czechoslovakia, Working Paper, Institute of Sociology (Praha, Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, 1992).)

[4] The labor force participation of women 20 to 24 years and 45 to 49 years was in excess of 80 percent, and that of women 25 to 44 years was more than 90 percent. (See Ludmila Venerová, "Brief Survey of the Situation of Czechoslovakian Women at the Beginning of the Transitional Period from Centrally-Planned to Market Economy," Regional Seminar on the Impact of Economic and Political Reform on the Status of Women in Eastern Europe and the USSR: The Role of National Machinery, Vienna, 1991).

[5] Zdenek Salzmann, "Portrayal of Gender Relations in Contemporary Czech Mass Media," *East European Quarterly*, January 1990, pp. 399–407.

[6] See Alena Heitlinger, "The Impact of the Transition from Communism on the Status of Women in the Czech and Slovak Republics," in Funk and Mueller, eds., *Gender Politics*, pp. 95–108; and Barbara W. Jancar, *Women under Communism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

[7] See V. I. Lenin, "On the Heroism of Workers in the Rear," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology* (New York, Norton, 1975), p. 484.

[8] This is in contrast, for instance, to Sweden, where fully 53 percent of women were employed part time in 1990, and the United States, where the figure was 27 percent. On the other hand, employees did not work all that hard under communism, often doing errands during working hours. A common joke was that "they pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work."

[9] Katerina Beaufortová, "Experience with Women's Emancipation in Czechoslovakia: What Next?" *European Network for Women's Studies*, 1990, pp. 21–22.

[10] This is well illustrated, for instance, by the constant refrain in Lenin's correspondence with Clara Zetkin to the effect that the revolution came first, whereupon the "women problem" would take care of itself. (Lenin, "Workers in the Rear.")

[11] It is widely believed that women often avoided demanding career-ladder jobs because of the burden of their "family responsibilities." (See Dorothy Sheridan, "Researching Women's Lives: Notes from Visits to East Central Europe," *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1992, pp. 91–95.) Many women also point out that successful careers in those days required membership in the Communist party and that numerous women took refuge in motherhood and family responsibilities as a form of resistance to such membership. They felt sorry for men, who did not have this option (Heitlinger, private correspondence, 1993).

[12] The outcome was very similar in other Communist countries. (See Francine D. Blau and Marianne A. Ferber, "Women's Work, Women's Lives: A Comparative Economic Perspective," in Hilda Kahne and Janet Z. Giele, eds., *Women's Work and Women's Lives* (Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1992), pp. 324–46.)

[13] Vertical segregation exists when men and women are in the same occupation, but at different levels. For more information on occupational segregation in Czechoslovakia, see Alena Heitlinger, *Women and State Socialism: Sex Inequality in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979).

[14] Havelková, for instance, suggests in "Prefeminist Thoughts" that there had been a "negative form of equalization [which] was oppression of all through totalitarian means" (p. 65).

[15] These are the opinions that emerge in a multitude of papers and newspaper columns. Needless to say, there are exceptions, especially among highly educated, professional women. For the most part, however, even the newly founded research organizations that focus on gender studies, while trying to establish contact with their Western counterparts and searching for desperately needed resources, do not subscribe to much of feminist ideology (Jiřina Šiklová and Olga Kučerová-Podkolodný, personal correspondence, 1993).

[16] Most of the references in this section date from the period before the breakup of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics. The unpublished manuscripts cited were provided by several of the new institutions concerned with gender studies in the Czech Republic.

[17] In an untitled paper presented at the Feminist Conference in Norwich, United Kingdom, in July 1991, Alena Valterová stated the following: "At work, women are valued very low because of the high sickness rate of their children, resulting from a polluted environment . . . . [Women themselves] feel that they fail as mothers because of the lack of time they can devote to their children. In the mass media they are continuously confirmed in the belief that their only hobby ought to be that which cuts down on the family budget. Cooking recipes, sewing patterns, gardening and such like are the main information especially intended for and supplied to them" (p. 2). Further, "with 42.5 working hours a week, 4–5 hours of housework a day, commuting to work and standing in queues, a mother of two is left with only 5–7 hours of sleep a day" (p. 2). The implication is that women had virtually no time or energy for developing their own personalities.

[18] Sharon L. Wolchik, "Women and Work in Communist and Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe," in Kahne and Giele, *Work and Lives*, pp. 119–39. For the most part, the situation is similar in other former Eastern Bloc countries, such as Hungary and Poland (Sydney Lewis, AID/Office of Women in Development, private correspondence, 1992).

[19] Hauser, "Perspectives of Feminism."

[20] Wolchik, *Women and Work*, pp. 130–31.

[21] Hauser, "Perspectives of Feminism."

[22] According to an estimate based on data in *Employment Observatory: Central and Eastern Europe*, May 1993, real wages in 1992 were about 71 percent of what they were in 1988.

[23] Valterová, untitled, p. 16.

[24] See Alena Heitlinger, "The Status of Women in Changing Economies," paper presented at the meetings of the American Economic Association, New Orleans, Jan. 2–5, 1992; and anonymous, "Informace k uplatnování rovnoprávného postavení mužů a žen" [Information about the Success of Equal Status of Men and Women], undated. A symptom of the prevailing situation is that on any evening an entirely male gathering may be found in the "pubs" in the small towns and villages, while the women are, no doubt, at home doing the dishes and minding the children.

[25] Wolchik, *Women and Work.*

[26] Hauser, "Perspectives of Feminism."

[27] It is widely accepted that Czechoslovakia's achievements were admirable "in areas such as child care, protection of the career trajectories of women who [chose] to bear children, and general social support for parenthood" (Robert J. McIntyre, review of Alena Heitlinger, *Reproduction, Medicine, and the Socialist State,* in *Women and Politics,* Vol. 9, No. 2, 1989, pp. 75–77).

[28] Heitlinger, "Status of Women."

[29] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Women, Work, and Child Care* (Casablanca, Morocco, Innocenti Global Seminar, 1991).

[30] Havelková, "Prefeminist Thoughts," p. 71.

[31] The proportion of employed women who worked reduced hours did, however, rise from 8.1 percent in 1987 to 11.6 percent in 1990. (See Anna Okruhlíčová, "The Influence of Social and Economical Changes in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic on the Position of Women," paper presented at the Regional Seminar on the Impact of Economic and Political Reform on the Status of Women in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R.: The Role of National Machinery, Vienna, Austria, April 1991.)

[32] See Constance Sorrentino, "Analyzing labor markets in Central and Eastern Europe," *Monthly Labor Review*, November 1992, pp. 43–46.

[33] *Employment Observatory.*

[34] Beaufortová, "Women's Emancipation."

[35] Liba Paukert, "Czechoslovakia," in Valentina M. Maghadam, ed., *Research for Action* (Tokyo, World Institute for Developing Economics Research, U.N. University, 1992).

[36] *Employment Observatory*, p. 14.

[37] To date, the proportion of female students at all levels of education remains high: 64.7 percent in secondary vocational schools, 40.5 percent in apprentice schools, and 45 percent in universities (Venerová, "Situation of Czechoslovakian Women," 1991).

[38] See three undated papers out of the Curriculum Centre and Library for Gender Studies in Praha: two by Iveta Jusová entitled "Feminism from a Czechoslovak Perspective" and "Women in Czechoslovakia: Striving toward Democracy"; and the third by Hana Navarová entitled "What Did Socialism Give to Women?"

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