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Gender Regimes *During and After* Socialism: Bulgarian Women's Experiences of Employment

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Abstract:

The paper explores the gender regimes in Bulgaria during the periods of state socialism and the post-1989 democratisation with a particular focus on women's employment. Discussion of continuity and change in the regimes illuminates the potential positive and negative outcomes for women's circumstances and positioning in Bulgarian society. The paper draws upon democratisation literature on gender and findings from recent qualitative research and outlines where women stand in relation to historical change and how their generation influences their experiences, senses of self, and agency.

Keywords: gender regimes during and after socialism; employment of women in Bulgaria; victimising discourse



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Introduction

It has been almost twenty years since the changes swept through Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the communist regimes throughout the region collapsed symbolising the end of the Cold War. Einhorn (1993) is among the authors who convincingly deconstructed the myth that a magic wand liberated women in Eastern Europe from their oppression under state socialism and transformed them into active agents who enjoy full democratic and citizenship rights in the new market condition.

The development of Bulgarian post-socialist society during the last decade proved Einhorn was right, and Cinderella did go to market. However, the consequences for Bulgarian Cinderellas have been contradictory. With positive and negative characteristics in both socialist and post-socialist periods, it is not possible to draw unambiguous conclusion about the winnings and losses women experienced during the transition. Further more, some characteristics, for example women's participation in full-time paid employment, have been theorised through both negative and positive prism by different scholars. Therefore, the paper is not an attempt to represent the considered periods as having certain rigid characteristics that can be seen either as beneficial or disadvantageous for women. The author's argument is, therefore, suggesting a more fluid picture of the socialist/ post-socialist dichotomy, in which the idea of two different types of discourses is considered.

The socialist period is perceived as dominated by a (formal) gender egalitarian discourse, especially within the sphere of paid employment. That can be illustrated by the emblematic images of socialist emancipated women, largely represented by the socialist media – images of 'shock-workers driving a tractor or a combine harvester in the field, their faces blossoming in smiles [... and] expressing their equality with men' (Fotev, 2000, p.17). A very different, 'victimising discourse' (Kilgman, 1996), has been valid since the start of the democratisation period, representing women as losers/ victims of the male-centred transformation. To contrast these two types of discourses, some observations about the gender in/equality in post-socialist Bulgaria will be made, thus attempting to criticise the way women have been theorised (victimised).

Gender and Employment *During State Socialism*

The preceding non-democratic regime is not only the starting point in any general analysis of democratization, it also forms a key component of a gendered analysis (Waylen, 2003) of the democratization. There are two main reasons for this: first, it is important to be able to see the post-1989 period not only as a breakaway from the past, but also in part as continuity of it (Gal and Kilgman, 2000); and second, because dominant practices and ideas associated with gender, either new or inherited from the past, have been crucial in shaping the broad changes that have occurred since the collapse of socialism (ibid).

One of the main characteristics of state socialism lies in the conviction that women's exclusion from paid employment can be identified as key to their oppression (Molyneux, 1981; 1990). Therefore, the socialist governments attempted to erase gender differences by guaranteed participation in full-time employment of both genders. It could be argued that under state socialism many differences within occupational, social, and economic categories were reduced, and women were more fully integrated into the labour force (Paskaleva et al, 1998). State policy was formally committed to one hundred percent employment of both genders, thus guaranteeing all adults a job with a reasonable pay (ibid, p: 9) and producing highly qualified women, as well as men (Pascall and Kwak, 2005).

In order to boost women's participation in the labour market, the socialist governments created a whole system of work-related entitlements that made paid employment not only a moral obligation, but also a 'a welfare passport' for women (Pascal and Manning, 2000: 248). Workplace social provision, parental leave and benefits, kindergartens and nurseries, strong family allowance systems (Pascall and Kwak, 2005) were among the state-guaranteed entitlements.

Employment was highly controlled by the state therefore was creating markedly different relation between the state, men and women than is commonly found in classic liberal parliamentary systems (Gal and Kilgman, 2000: 5). As a result women became more directly dependent on the state than on individual men (ibid). It has been argued that this security created lack of initiative, passivity and, furthermore, 'these prerogatives were taken for granted as the state's responsibility towards all citizens' (Lobodzinska, 1993: 6).

It has to be pointed out that granted employment and social security cannot be seen only in negative terms as they provided more opportunities for women to balance their employment

and domestic duties. Women felt much less pressure when they did not have to compete for their jobs and were not obliged to take part in a 'rat race' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004: 30) at a free labour market. 'Having more security' was seen as the most positive part of the socialist regime by my interviewees when they were asked to compare the two periods.

In spite of the heavily propagandised gender equality in the sphere of paid employment, the reality at the labour market was far from gender neutral. The state socialist system did not manage to challenge the gender job segregation and wage gaps. Women's dominance in lower-paid and less prestigious sectors, together with the lower representation of female employees in higher positions, contributed to the lower income of Bulgarian women compared to this of men (Anachkova, 1993). The official statement declared that men and women were paid identically for equal work. Hence, the higher income of men was explained with better performance (ibid).

The socialist governments did not manage to achieve the announced gender equality in the sphere of employment and the 'liberating' women's participation in full-time labour can be seen as problematic and not so liberating. Pilkington (1992) argues that the central-planned and controlled working process during socialism demanded little personal involvement and initiative. Another reason for women's dubious experience of employment, according to Pilkington (1992), is connected to the combination of professional and family roles that has been an oppressive obligation for women to perform both roles with little help from the state or their partners.

After the post-war period of rapid economic development passed, around 1960s the socialist government realized that the women's labour participation had some negative consequences. The socialization of domestic labour was expensive; there was decline in birth rates, and there was still resistance to some aspects of women's emancipation (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2006: 12). As a result the socialist government began to acknowledge women's significant role in the domestic sphere, as mothers, carers, housekeepers. However, these responsibilities were not supposed to release women from their employment duties (ibid).

This combination of women's dual roles as mothers and paid employees has created the so-called 'double burden' for women during the socialist period. It can be argued that while there was pressure to bring women into the paid labour market, there was no equivalent pressure to bring men into the household and care work (Einhorn, 1993; Pascall and Kwak, 2005). With

practically no civil society and no women's movement in socialist countries, the domestic division of labour remained unreconstructed and left women with double tasks (Paskal and Kwak, 2005). Therefore, it can be argued that, broadly, the regimes supported women as paid workers but at the same time they were sustaining traditional patterns of unpaid work in the family (Pascall and Manning, 2000: 241). Einhorn (1993) points out that overburdening women with triple tasks resulted in severe stress to the point that many women perceived their right to work as yet another obligation. The negative outcomes from women's 'multitasking' are widely discussed and are often referred to as 'the superwoman syndrome'. An image of female 'brave victims' (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, 2000: 159) was created emphasizing the self-sacrifice of women who work, who are upstanding citizens and also have happy marriages and admirable children (ibid: 156).

Having said that, it should not be underestimated that there were attempts to resolve the family-work conflicts. Childcare is often analyzed in its role as a facilitator of women's labour-force participation (Meurs and Giddings, 2006). The state socialist period was characterized by high rates of enrolment of children in state-run system of nursery and pre-school childcare. Granting more privileges, such as extended maternal and child-care paid leave, family allowances, family support funds, restriction of pregnant and nursing women's working hours, and free healthcare (Lobodzinska, 1993) must have reduced the amount of work required from women and therefore improved women's situation in general, even though these measures proved to be insufficient for a complete removal of the existing tensions between the domestic sphere and paid employment.

Very little is known about the influence of paid labour participation on women's identities and self-perception because of the vague information outside the official propaganda (Pilkington, 1992). However, trying to look at some positive aspects, it can be suggested that women's high labour market participation must have altered the terms on which they entered and negotiated family relationships. High levels of education could have contributed to women's more equal position in marriage as well (Pascall and Manning, 2000: 262).

The positive aspects of the regime, however, were overtaken by the negative and ambiguous characteristics and by the 1980s there was a growing perception that state socialist societies were in crisis. Economies were stagnating and social problems reflected in high rates of divorce, growing alcoholism and abortion (Weylen, 2003). By the end of 1989 when the state

socialism in Bulgaria collapsed, the foreign debt of the country had reached 9.2 Billion USD, that is over 1 thousand USD per head of the population (Bristow, 1996). Some of the negative trends continued and even became stronger during the democratization period. Therefore, the ‘heritage’ from the socialist period has to be brought into consideration in order to illuminate the current gender practices in post-socialist societies.

Gender and Employment *After* State Socialism

Bulgarians shared the expectations that the fall of socialism will improve living standards in the country, thus underestimating the depth of the forthcoming economic crisis (Paskaleva et al., 1998; Zlatanova, 2000: 91). Generally, the free market and the individualisation process were idealised (Kostova, 1998:203) and there was an illusion that once the democracy is achieved, it will automatically bring equality and prosperity to women (Todorova, 1993). The anticipations were that the free market conditions will be at least gender neutral (Pilkington, 1992: 204) and therefore little attention was paid to gender issues during the first decade of the democratic period.

In spite of the critiques of feminist scholars, the majority of the mainstream democratization literature has remained gender-blind, with very little said about the participation of women in transitions to democracy or the gendered nature of those processes (Waylen, 2003). Therefore, gender issues have not been popular and it can be argued that ‘awareness of gender difference is lacking at all levels of [Bulgarian post-socialist] society’ (Zlatanova, 2000: 97). At present, there has been a growing attempt to recognise that the post-socialist period has not been gender neutral and to add women into the democratisation literature.

The first years of the democratization period brought considerable changes in the pattern of women’s (and also men’s) employment. The socialist circumstances of guaranteed job and almost 100% employed adults disappeared very quickly after 1989. Privatization, liberalization of prices and salaries restricted the control of the state over the market and led to decline in real wages, increase of prices, decrease in the overall number of jobs. All this resulted in mass unemployment, reaching its peak of 21.4% in 1993. The percentage of women who were unemployed during that year is even higher, 22%, equal to 393,400 women in total (Eurostat, 2005; National Statistical Institute, 2005).

The differences between female and male unemployment rates have been widely discussed in the literature as an argument supporting the idea of gender differences during the transition. Data provided by the National Statistical Institute reveals that the percentage of unemployed Bulgarian women has been higher until 1998. Hence it can be argued that during the first years of the transition, there has been feminisation of unemployment as women were the first to lose their jobs (United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2003; Eurostat, 2005; National Statistical Institute, 2005; Fotev, 2000). It is difficult to argue about the actual proportion of unemployed women because after a longer period outside of paid labour some women begin to identify their occupation as 'housewife', unlike men who would still be registered as unemployed by the statistics (UNIFEM, 2006).

When looking at women's position in the labour market special attention has to be paid to the fact that employment activity rates for women have dramatically decreased during the transformation period and, they have been lower than men's during the whole post-socialist period (UNIFEM, 2006). In addition to that tendency the long-term unemployment rate for women has been rising from 52.3% in 1993 to 61.1% in 2005 and has been higher than men's rate during most of the democratisation period (UNECE database). This suggests that it is more difficult for women than for men, who have 'fallen off the board' of paid labour to come back on it.

The gender pay gap and job segregation continues from the socialist period. The statistic shows that there are more women professionals; they are twice as many as men, accounting 65% of all professionals. In spite of that, women are still outnumbered in the higher rank positions, such as legislators, senior officials and managers, where men occupy 70% of the jobs (Anachkova, 1993; UNIFEM, 2006: 46).

The structure of women's employment has changed since the collapse of socialism. The stable employment in state-run enterprises accompanied by long maternity leave and parental sick leave has been replaced by insecurity and unofficial disapproval of absenteeism from work for any reason because women have moved into the less protected private sector (Kostova, 1998). It has also been suggested that the new market conditions bring new risks that legislation aimed at protecting women's rights may be seen as a burden by private entrepreneurs and may reduce the demand for women's labour in private companies (Pascall and Manning, 2000: 248).

Another change in the employment circumstances is connected to the fact that many women work in the so-called informal or gray economy of the country. Women who choose to work in this sector have less protection, less job security and longer working weeks (Kostova, 1998; Vladimirova, 2003). Women's choices to work in the gray economy can be explained in the following way:

The main reasons for women's participation in the informal economy in Bulgaria are economic hardship and thus the need to secure income for sustaining themselves and their families. Some use the work to supplement regular, formal income, while others rely on informal work as their only source of livelihood. This is especially true for areas where unemployment rates are high [...] It is also the case when women are the sole breadwinners in the family or household (UNIFEM, 2006: 45).

The employment in this sector is particularly unfavourable as work conditions are harsh, social security benefits are rarely paid and many women do not or will not have access to pension and health benefits. In practice, there is no legal protection against injury or discrimination. Women working in the grey economy are often afraid to stand up for their rights. On the other hand they are preferred employees as they are viewed as more 'compliant' (ibid).

Women working in the informal economy were not the only ones who have lost, partly or fully, their rights as employees. Most of the benefits that have been created during the socialist period to support women's participation in paid work have been reduced or removed and it is 'increasingly difficult for mothers and would-be mothers to participate in the labour force on an equal foot with men' (UNIFEM, 2006: 19). This argument can be supported with statistical data revealing that the most significant gender differences in employment rate are observed in the 25-34 age group where the female employment rate has been 10% lower than male with little change during the whole democratic period. (WAD, 2006: 13). There is more difficult access of young women to the labour market because of employer's reluctance to offer jobs to young women who have children or who are seen as likely to have children in near future. Therefore, the dilemma work, income and possible career, or family, husband and/ or children is relevant for many young Bulgarian women to whom the free labour market has been hostile.

Another group of women that represent a high-risk category at the post-socialist labour market in Bulgaria is the group of women close to retiring age, and retired women. Although

pensions ensure secure monthly income, the pension payments are very low to ensure any existence above the living minimum:

Many retirees spend their remaining years in poverty and social isolation (especially in rural areas) and social exclusion (especially in urban areas), including many who are eager to work for pay and capable of doing so. This is especially true for women, who live longer than men and yet are expected to retire earlier (UNIFEM, 2006: 36).

Living longer and retiring earlier means that women have longer periods of dependence on social benefits in their life and have to live longer in poverty.

The age group of above 45 years old is an ‘extension’ to the previous one in the sense that the labour market sees these women as too old to re-qualify which makes it very difficult for women at this age to find employment once they have lost the one that they had. The proportion of unemployed women in this group is comparatively low, which might be misleading that the group has stable position at the labour market. More detailed data about the employment characteristics of this group demonstrates that, most of the time the employment is long-term, ‘old’ employment (WAD, 2003: 15). Women from this group are very vulnerable to poverty once they remain outside employment because employers are not willing to ‘invest’ in women that are close to retiring age, or simply because they have certain age-specific requirements for the positions offered by their companies (ibid). Women in this group have received their education and training during the socialist period and the experience they have is not always applicable to the new situation. Therefore these women are likely to have difficulties in adapting to the dynamics of the free market.

Legislation for equal rights at work remains from the socialist era but the gap between rights and practice widens (Pascall and Manning, 2000: 240). Research carried out by the World Bank and the Agency for Social Analysis reveals that more people identify themselves as poor (Dimova, 2002) in comparison to 1989. Only 2.4 % of men and 2.9% of women identified themselves as poor in 1989, while in 2002 38.9% of men and 47.4% of women considered themselves poor (ibid: 12). The comparative overview of the data reveals that the share of people self-estimating themselves poor increases during the post-1989 years, but also that women have strongest feeling of poverty then men have (ibid). The consequences of the impoverishment can be summarized as:

Poverty stands out for a life philosophy and an overwhelming barrier to forming of normal self-confidence and own human dignity. Poverty became also a prism in the light of which desires and intentions are formed (Dimova, 2002: 16)

The groups most vulnerable to impoverishment are women (more than men), pensioners and/ or over the age of 60, low educated, living in remote urban areas or in small towns, ethnic minorities. It has been widely discussed that women live longer in poverty due to their higher life expectancy, but Dimova (2002) reveals another aspect of women's difficulties. She argues that 'there is danger of a second generation of poor and women are the main vehicles for reproduction of the culture of poverty into the next generation' (ibid: 8).

The 'human cost' of the transformation, although more difficult to measure, has been very significant as people began to experience falling wages, growing crime, loss of social protection, and even decrease in life expectancy in some former socialist countries (Atal, 1999). Poverty and insecurity have forced women into creating unconventional ways of dealing with the situation. Pascall and Manning (2000: 240) suggest that, in spite of the new freedoms to organize their activity, women focus their action more often on coping and survival than on politics. Women's choice to enter the gray economy has already been discussed as a means of survival and coping with the economic difficulties. Another way of dealing with the situation is creating of non-formal networks of support between family members and friends, for exchange of goods, services, care and childcare activities. As this sphere is not part of employment, it will not be discussed in detail.

Another coping strategy is the so-called 'natural economy' or production of goods and services, which occupies a significant part of the time of the Bulgarians (Iliev, 2004). This phenomenon remains under-researched because the amount of time and energy that people spend producing own goods is unregistered, a form of informal activity. According to the report 'The Hidden Economy in Bulgaria' of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, more than one third of all people in the sample spend time for farming or agriculture (Iliev, 2004). Most of the time this production is used for the needs of the family and replaces the consumption of purchased goods.

Women's role in natural economy is not sufficiently explained and more attention needs to be attracted to revealing what the gender divisions in this sphere are, what kind of activities are women's responsibility, what the proportion of time that both genders spend on production

of goods and services is, and how the ‘income’ is distributed. The natural economy needs to be seen as an alternative and/ or supplement of paid employment, another source of ‘burden’ and ‘preoccupation’, yet another sphere in which women’s participation and contribution remains unrecognized.

Another important aspect that has been insufficiently theorized by the democratization literature is that women from different cohorts have different abilities, attitudes and behaviors at the labour market. This is not connected only to age, but also to experiences (or lack of it) related to the socialist period. Whenever women’s circumstances are considered it is important to evaluate the processes of continuity and change and to illuminate the way in which the different political, social and economic order has influenced women’s ability to accept and adapt to new situations.

It is important to acknowledge that the combination of age factors and experience of socialist regimes makes it more difficult for women from the socialist cohort to adapt to the new regime. Findings from recently carried research demonstrated that women who belong to the ‘socialist cohort’ show less flexibility at the free labour market; they demonstrate less willingness to change jobs and more personal attachment to their professions. They do not feel as competitive as young people and are afraid of expressing their opinion because they might lose their job. Women from this group see their employment as their mission, part of their (collective) identity and as their contribution to society. At the same time younger women, who do not have the ‘heritage’ from the socialist period have demonstrated more flexible approach and more pro-active attitudes at the labour market. They are more willing to initiate change, to take risks and express opinions. Their employment is part of their process of individualisation, as means of acquiring the lifestyle they want, and seen also as career developing or contributing to their self, rather than as a profession that serves others.

The problems of these two groups of women have are very different, specific to the cohort, and should be researched and addressed separately. Older women have had the privileges of the socialist period but their experience is not always relevant to the new situation was often described as an obstacle for adapting to the changes. On the other hand, younger women who did not have (adult) experience of socialism do not have the gains of that period; they have to raise their children and to manage their employment in the free market conditions with almost no protection from the state, with no financial and employment security. Therefore,

these women have their specific problems that also deserve separate attention. Besides the numerous differences that have been pointed out, the research also showed commonalities, especially when women's desire to participate in paid employment is considered. There are different attitudes towards employment but the research findings demonstrate that women give high priority to paid work as a source of individual income, contacts with others, and self-esteem.

More unconventional forms of labour, such as participation in the natural economy, and exchange of goods and services have to be included in the analysis of the post-socialist labour market participation of women because they illuminate women's ability to initiate surviving strategies and to cope with the post-socialist reality. However, women's contributions and agency during the transformation period has been overlooked. There is a serious gap in the way women's employment and more generally women's circumstances and choices have been theorised.

Theorizing Women's Employment

The employment circumstances of women in post-socialist societies are difficult to theorize because there is both continuity and change in the gender regimes during the two periods, but also because both regimes are characterized by contradictory tendencies. Feminist analyses are probably the most valuable means of adding women into the transition period theory, because they are able to acknowledge that women have been 'left out' and their role in the transformation period remains invisible. Women are seen as active participants of the mass demonstrations and broad movements that contributed to the collapse of state socialism (Waylen, 2003) and yet their role on the post-socialist reality is underestimated and seen as passive and/ or victimized. In this framework theorists discuss the double burdening of women by the socialist government and many aspects of the unfavourable labour market after the collapse of socialism. Thus, a significant body of literature has been portraying women as victims of both socialism and the transformation.

Funk and Mueller (1993) are among the authors who argue that women's interests have been sacrificed during the transformation period and there has been desire to subordinate them and to push them back into the private sphere. They explain this with the collapse of the

collectivist (communist) ideology and the entailing search for new identity and cultural practices, as a result of which a new ‘wave’ of traditionalism and pre-socialist identities emerge. Asanbeigui et al (1994) have a similar approach as they suggest that women have been over-represented among the losers and under-represented among the winners of the economic transformation. Their argument is based on observations about discrimination in hiring, limited opportunities outside the low-paid sectors, overrepresentation of women among the unemployed, less accumulated capital by women due to their traditionally lower income, inferior position within the household, decrease in women’s political representation. They conclude that governments have failed to prevent women from being marginalized on the assumption that reforms are gender neutral.

Einhorn (1993) observes that, at least in the short run of the first few years after the collapse of the socialist regimes, ‘women in East Central Europe stand to loose economic, social welfare, and reproductive rights’ (Einhorn, 1993: 1). In addition to that, she suggest that a new ‘cult for motherhood’ emerged in post-socialist societies, who see all the social ills of state socialism in undermining the family and women’s role in it. Gal and Kilgman (2000b) suggest very similar circumstances and point out the role of the post-socialist media by arguing that ‘media campaigns blamed a host of societal ills – from demographic decline to lapses in public morality – on women’s supposedly inadequate mothering and selfishness’ (Gal and Kilgman, 2000b: 53).

Women from the former communist countries, who did not have access to Western feminist writings and did not have their own feminisms (in the same sense as the Western ones), are likely to have perceived the propagandised gender equality with less questioning. Therefore, the new ways of looking at their circumstances in terms of victims must have affected their identity and sense of self.

My arguments are paralleled by Kilgman’s (1996: 69) analysis that the discouraging predictions about women’s opportunities in post-communist Eastern Europe have resonated in many ways in the public and private spheres. Kilgman (1996: 69) further argues that generalisations such as ‘women have gotten the short end of the stick’, ‘women comprise more of the unemployed’, ‘poverty has been feminised’, ‘there has been a backlash against women in the realm of state governance’, all these generalisations obscure the discussions of post-socialist

societies and affect women, affect how they see themselves, and also affect general perceptions about women in post-socialist societies.

Conclusion

Women have been denied the role of the ‘brave victim’ by the accelerating process of individualisation after the collapse of socialism. Although the economic survival of the women’s families still depends on their participation in labour market, either formal or informal, the new modernity, seen as ‘circumstances of uncertainty and multiple choice’ (Giddens, 1991: 3) requires a psychic reorganisation (ibid: 33) and demands ‘a bit of a life of one’s own’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 56). Women from former socialist countries are therefore living through the transformations of their societies from state stoicism to free market, together with their personal transformations from collectivism to individualism.

A victimising discourse is adding up to the burdens of these women because it offers an unfavourable suggestion of identity at present and adverse revision of the existing identities in the past. It also underestimates the everyday victories of women, their creativeness and agency in coping with the situation. A victimising discourse also offers a generalised image of ‘the woman – victim’ in the post-socialist period and fails to recognise some important distinctions in the way different groups of women adapt to free market employment. Analyses based on statistical data and on general employment patterns is important, however, a more flexible approach to analysing women’s circumstances is necessary. Thus more attention will be paid to choices women make regarding their employment, career, work/life balance and how women evaluate the choices they have made.

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