



“Summary of article by Barbara Lobodzinska: Women’s Employment or Return to ‘Family Values’ in Central-Eastern Europe” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 323-326

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Women in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe face many confusing changes, often involving conflicting values. Not only do they face the transition from socialist to capitalist economies, and from authoritarian to democratic government, they must redefine their own roles in relation to work, family and their own self-image and aspirations. To further complicate this transition, the ideology of socialism, which proclaimed equality for women, was not fully implemented in the day to day reality of women's lives.

Under socialism, as under capitalism, women often worked two shifts: one on a job, the other at home. However, under socialism, the expectation that women would work in a paid job was much higher and many economic institutions were organized around that expectation. Now that those institutions are being taken apart, women are reevaluating the rewards to working outside of their family responsibilities, and the realistic options for getting good jobs in a volatile economy.

IDEOLOGY VS REALITY

"Socialist ideology claimed `equality for all' as a token taken for granted. Women were indoctrinated that the road to universal equality is outlined by achievement of justice for all workers (men and women alike) in the process of their victorious struggle against the exploiting owners of the means of production (not associated with men). Women were not expected to distinguish their own specific needs and issues ... because only through being a worker (preferably in the heavy industry) they had a chance to achieve equality." [339]

Although equality was the official doctrine, many women found themselves in an inferior position, working in monotonous, low status jobs while bearing most, if not all, of the responsibility for maintaining home and family. Many managers believed that women were good at these tedious jobs and ill suited to work requiring creativity, adaptation to change, technical skill or managerial responsibility.

In Poland, Hungary and Lithuania women may have achieved a higher average level of education than men, but they were more focused on the humanities, teaching, social sciences and medicine, as opposed to the vocational and technical tracks followed by men. With men expected to be the primary bread-winners, and female earnings averaging only 70% of their

husbands, women's occupational choices were less oriented to personal career considerations. Many women accepted low-skilled white collar and service jobs that could flexibly combine the roles of wife, mother and employee. Often a predilection for less-demanding work compatible with responsibilities in the home was instilled in girls early in life by their own families. Where women did move into skilled positions formerly dominated by men, like teaching or medicine, those professions lost status.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND MOTIVATIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT

"[W]omen are regarded by many in the former socialist countries as the primary losers under the new circumstances." [536] As Central and Eastern European countries moved toward market economies, unemployment became a problem. With jobs scarce, women were often consigned to less attractive ones. To the extent that family and mother's benefits still exist, they make women more expensive, and therefore less desirable, as employees.

In some ways, socialism had fulfilled its ideals about working: since every able adult was expected to work, wages were set with the expectation that families would have two incomes and many benefits were tied to employment, including generous benefits for mothers. Economic reality along with social pressure thus obliged nearly all women to work outside the home; nevertheless, family roles remained central to their choice of employment. However, researchers have long noted that women often have other, more personal, reasons for working. They may wish for financial independence, or want to pursue particular interests, or want to be involved in activity and relationships outside the home. A survey of unemployed women in Poland in the early 1990s discovered that nearly half defined an occupation as "a source of satisfaction," while 22.5% saw it as "a chance to utilize own abilities and qualifications," and only 18.1% sought an occupation as "a source of high income." [529] One indication that women have aspirations beyond financial need is that women have been steadily increasing their skills and education, even though, under the egalitarian ethic of socialism, higher education does not result in much higher pay.

A large survey of occupationally active women was carried out in Poland in 1987 and again in 1991, both before and after the emergence of the market economy. When asked to choose among several possible lifestyles, the largest group of respondents (about one third, in both phases) thought women "should work, but [should expect] to interrupt work in order to take care of the children, to aim for family partnership relationships, to favor harmonious family life over own career advancement." [353] The next largest group (about 23%) preferred full equality with men both at home and at work. However when the group that is willing to work only if it doesn't interfere with the family is combined with respondents who felt that home and family should be women's primary (or only) occupation, three quarters of all respondents in both phases weighed in on the side of putting family first. The percentage of women who would choose a successful career even at the expense of the family was negligible.

Women's values did not change radically after the fall of socialism; the majority of women hoped to find some combination of work and family responsibility. The central goal, now as before, was the preservation of the family. However the economic changes have left many families struggling for survival, without accustomed health and family benefits or even a job.

"Many signs indicate that in the past, combining family and occupational roles was burdensome and not rewarding enough for women." [34] Unemployment, however, is no solution; housing shortages and reduced incomes mean overcrowding and lack of privacy.

RETURN TO "FAMILY VALUES"

Women's concerns, pushed to the background, are generally ignored by politicians and political activists. Religious organizations that have taken up the cause of the family encourage a return to traditional family values: i.e., favoring strong marital relationships and rejecting divorce and abortion. The back-to-home tendency has been much publicized, but in reality the trend is complicated by a reaction to the mandatory nature of work under socialism. Women now are evaluating work, not under pressure to meet a "politically correct" ideal, but with consideration of realistic options for getting good jobs and the real burden of their domestic obligations. Under socialism, women were told they had already achieved equality, but behind the ideology a very traditional, patriarchal set of values kept women in a second class, and overburdened, role.

Under capitalism, the challenge will be for women to achieve equality under more competitive and entrepreneurial conditions, requiring new technical skills. The conditions for job equality must include upgrading of machinery and other work-related equipment to Western standards which, among other things, have effectively abolished the employment advantage of strong (male) musculature. To achieve equal treatment and full participation of women, it is also necessary for men to recognize that children are important to them as well as to their mothers, and to learn to communicate and cooperate at home. Women need role models and an understanding of how discrimination limits their prospects. The conflict between motherhood and employment was camouflaged in the past by small family size and low-pressure jobs. Now it is possible to face this conflict more openly, but for women to change their situation men must also change their ways of thinking, and there must be changes in the legal basis for gender-stereotyping in jobs.