

Alicia Smith

The Contradictions of Change: The Relative Status of Women in the Work Force After the Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe

The fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union marked the end of an era in which official ideology and state policy often masked the reality of citizens' lives. This contradiction was particularly acute for women, a group that the Soviet model of communism was intended to emancipate (Basu, 1995; Bystydzienski, 1992; Corrin, 1992; Einhorn, 1993; Millarand and Wolchik, 1994; Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994; Rueschemeyer, 1994). Under the guise of Marxist-Leninist ideology, women were accorded an equal right to work and to participate in the building of socialism. The Soviet model, which was imposed to a greater or lesser extent on all of the Eastern European countries, was meant to embody this precept.

In order to mobilize women into the work force, the party-state provided numerous social programs--free day care, subsidized school supplies and clothing, guaranteed maternity leave, and nearly full employment. Women, however, were hardly emancipated through these programs. They were concentrated, with a few notable exceptions, in a "pink collar ghetto" of low wage and low prestige jobs and often given employment well below their educational qualifications. Moreover, the "emancipation" accorded them by state officials resulted in an extreme "double burden" (Basu, 1995; Bystydzienski, 1992; Corrin, 1992; Einhorn, 1993; Millarand and Wolchik, 1994; Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994; Rueschemeyer, 1994). They were expected to perform both paid and domestic labor, fulfilling most (or all) of the household and parenting duties without modern conveniences. These superwomen worked full-time jobs and then came home to prepare meals and clean house for their families. They did not have microwaves and dishwashers; even shopping could be a cumbersome ordeal. Women consequently suffered from feelings of exhaustion, guilt, and inadequacy towards their children, not to mention low levels of career satisfaction.

Western scholars and observers hailed the transition toward democracy as a liberating force for women living under communist rule. These changes, however, have not automatically brought an expansion of rights and opportunities for women. In fact alarming trends emerging throughout the post-communist region reveal that women stand to lose many of the rights to which they were formerly accustomed. Women are not well represented in the new democratic political structures. And, in demonstrating their opposition to Communist policies, new democratic leaders are passing legislation which curtails reproductive rights and removes many of the social safety nets that women and children have come to rely upon. At the same time, increasing unemployment has led enterprises to "shed labor" and women have usually been the first to go (Commander and Coricelli, 1994; Corrin, 1992; Einhorn, 1993; Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994; Rueschemeyer, 1994; Scheppele, 1995; Slay, 1994).

The present research is concerned with this reevaluation of "woman as worker" in the post-communist countries. Are some countries better able to maintain female participation in the work force? Are women leaving the work force voluntarily or are they being pushed? And, what are the determinants of the relative participation of women in the work force in post-communist countries? These questions are examined in a comparative case study of women's work force participation in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Case Selection and Research Design

In the social sciences, a distinction is commonly made between the experimental, statistical, and comparative methods of research. The experimental method is widely considered superior, due to the high degree of control that the researcher commands (potentially all irrelevant or confounding factors can be eliminated as causal factors through the use of control groups). Unfortunately, social phenomena can rarely be manipulated into experimental conditions. The best approximation is the statistical method, where the use of partial correlation's allows the researcher to systematically control for the effects of different variables across a large number of cases. When a researcher is comparing phenomena in a relatively small number of cases, however, it is almost impossible to use a statistical method. In these circumstances, a degree of control can be achieved through careful case selection.

The two main comparative case strategies are "most similar" and "most different." The former selects cases (countries) that are as close to identical as possible on all variables except the phenomenon under investigation (the dependent variable). All those characteristics of the cases that can be matched are then eliminated as possible explanations of the dependent variable (Lijphart, 1971). The "most different" design, on the other hand, selects cases that do not differ on the dependent variable. Those characteristics that differ between the cases can then be eliminated as causal variables (Przeworski and Teune, 1970).

Poland and the Czech Republic fulfill the requirements of a most similar research design. They differ in terms of the phenomenon under examination--women's work force participation. Poland has one of the highest rates of female unemployment among all Eastern European countries following the transition and its unemployment level for women continues to rise. As can be seen in Table 1, Poland's total level of female employment was 3.8% in 1990, 11.8% in 1991, and 14.9% in 1992. These percentages reveal a steady increase in the rate of women's unemployment since the fall of communism. The Czech Republic, on the other hand, has the lowest rate of female unemployment in Eastern Europe following the transition. The unemployment rate among women has actually declined slightly since 1991. The unemployment level for women was 1.0% in 1990, 7.3% in 1991, and 5.4% in 1992.

Table 1

Unemployment (thousands and percentage of unemployed)

Former Czechoslovakia

	<u>1989</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>1992</u>
Male/female	1	77	524	395
M		38	239	187
F		39	239	187
% MF		1	6.6	5.1
%M		0.9	5.9	4.7
%F		1	7.3	5.4

Poland

	<u>1989</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>1992</u>
Male/Female		591	1684	2355
M		290	717	1103
F		301	967	1252
%MF		3.5	9.7	13.3
%M		3.2	7.9	11.8
%F		3.8	11.8	14.9

Why has the Czech Republic been more successful in maintaining women's employment than Poland? A number of potential explanatory factors can be controlled for in this design, because Poland and Czechoslovakia share many common characteristics. They are located in close geographical proximity to each other and to the West, and they experienced the collapse of state socialism within months of one another. Both countries shared exposure to the world of the Hapsburg Empire, as opposed to the Ottoman Empire which left its mark on the Balkans. Both were firmly integrated into Soviet security, political, and socioeconomic systems. Both also shared a history of crushed rebellions against Soviet hegemony (the Prague Spring of 1968, Polish uprisings of 1956 and 1980-81). Finally, the official policy toward women's work force participation in both Poland and the Czech Republic stipulated paid public work. Consequently, political culture, proximity to the West and its models of employment, and pre-transition employment policies cannot be marshalled to explain the difference in female work force participation in the two cases. Other factors must be considered.

Literature Review

Scholars suggest several variables that should affect women's work force participation after the fall of communism. Most agree that the call for women to return to the home is a major factor in determining the relative status of women in the work force (Basu, 1995; Bystydzienski, 1992; Corrin, 1992; Einhorn, 1993; Millarand and Wolchik, 1994; Reuschmeyer, 1994). With many countries now focusing on the importance of the family, in part as a mechanism for

social stability, political officials are encouraging women to reassume their "primary responsibility" to stay home and bear children (Einhorn, 1993: 129).

Furthermore, Barbara Einhorn states that "the struggle to survive in the market, accompanied by the pressures of the privatization process, created an inexorable logic for the need to shed labor--in this process, it seems that women are the first to go" (Einhorn, 1993: 129). Women's participation in the work force is damaged by the fact that many industries such as textile and clothing, which predominately employed women, are now collapsing because they cannot compete with higher quality imports (Einhorn, 1993: 130). Reuschmeyer (1994: 12) concurs that, "there appears to be widespread agreement that current levels of women's employment are too high and should be reduced." Indeed, market reforms are based on the cutting down of "unproductive" labor and women are often targeted as "unproductive" (Corrin, 1992: 16).

Another by-product of market reforms is the loss of subsidized child care and maternity leave. Maternity leave, which is still legally valid in many of the countries in Eastern Europe, is being violated all the time. Either the jobs that women held do not exist any more, or the enterprise has been privatized and the new owners feel no responsibility to take the women back (Einhorn, 1993: 130). The process of privatization is marked by the closure of child care facilities, which in turn means that many women now have to stay home with their children. This further degrades their status in the work force (Einhorn, 1993;132, Corrin, 1992: 18).

An additional factor, scholars concur, is that many women now feel that they have suffered from too much "emancipation" under communism and are eager to return to the home. reason for this lies in the adversity and frustration that women encountered as a result of their "double burden."

Explaining Women's Employment Status in Post-Communist Systems

Based on the literature, three variables will be tested as possible explanations of the differing female unemployment statistics in Poland and the Czech Republic: (1) national ideology, (2) the state of economic transition, and (3) individual motivations. With regard to the first variable, I would expect that nations with strongly nationalist or religious forces will tend to define the role of women in terms of "home and hearth." Religion is a well-established marker for this sort of conservative ideology about women. Poland has a strong, vocal, and politically entrenched Catholic Church which has traditionally been tied to Polish nationalism. This stands in contrast to Czechoslovakia with its mixture of religions and its lack of any single church that represents the conservative national position. Hence, I would expect Poland to be more oriented toward shedding women workers than the Czech Republic.

The state of the country's economy should also affect women's level of employment. By state of the economy I mean the condition of the economy--is it stable or unstable? For instance, if businesses and industries are collapsing and inflation is continually rising, then this will have a direct impact on the unemployment rate of the entire population. The overall rate of unemployment also affects women's own work force participation.

The final variable is women's own motivation for employment. If the prevailing attitude favors retreat from the work force, this attitude will obviously have an effect on women's level of work force participation. Similarly, if the prevailing mentality promotes other means of escaping the double burden, then unemployment levels should remain higher.

Results of Comparison of National Identity and Religion

As expected, national ideology seems to affect women's level of employment in Poland and the Czech Republic. This is strongly influenced by the role and activism of religious groups. In Poland, religion is a much more dominant force than in the Czech Republic. Nearly ninety-five percent of the population is Catholic, seventy-five percent of which are practicing Catholics. Thus, it is a very homogenous and highly religious population. The Czech Republic is more heterogeneous. There is no single dominant religion. Only thirty-nine percent of the Czech Republic's population claim to be Catholic. Thus, over sixty percent of the people are of different religious backgrounds.

The Polish and Czech churches and state officials differ in their views on women. In Poland, the Catholic Church has emerged as a powerful voice in politics. Polish religious leaders and many state officials are urging women to return to the home. With the economy and government in a state of flux, politicians have directed their attention towards the family and nationalist ideologies which emphasize the importance of the family and the woman as the bearer and caregiver of children. They view this as a sort of security blanket, as well as a necessary condition for restoring national unity and identity. Barbara Einhorn (1993: 57) writes:

"Public discourse dominated by nationalist ideologies and often sanctified by the church defines the family

as the basis of the ethnic or wider national group, and gives it, and women as mothers within it, a mission in the name of that community."

The moral voice of the Catholic Church in Poland has been enhanced by the presence of a Polish Pope. Pope John Paul II has repeatedly stated the Church's position on the proper role of women. He has brought this message home to Poland. In 1991, he described individualism as unsuitable for Poland, contrasting the strong traditional values of the community and family with false collectivism of state socialism (Einhorn, 1993: 67). Those women who participate in the work force are seen as having "individualistic" tendencies to put private happiness above the collective good.

Because the Catholic Church has long been associated with Polish nationalism, the role of women is increasingly tied to their role in bearing children and sustaining Polish culture. There may be long term detrimental effects for women because of this emphasis on the rights of the nation as a community over the rights of individual citizens. Einhorn (1993: 115) writes

"confining the parameters of female rights and duties to the private domain curtails women's freedom in terms of choice about the ways in which they wish to develop their potential. It also undermines their ability to exercise citizenship rights in the public sphere of work and politics."

Women in Poland are therefore being encouraged to leave the work force. In fact, more than ninety occupations in Poland are "legally" closed to women, and newspaper employment advertisements are routinely labeled "male" and "female" (Scheppelle, 1995: 66).

Women in the Czech Republic, conversely, are not experiencing the same situation as women in Poland with regard to national ideology and religion. The Czech Republic does not have a singular "state religion;" And, since the break away of the Slovak Republic, there is little to mobilize Czech nationalism. There is scant evidence to suggest that women are being actively encouraged to retreat into the home. Indeed, the official position is that women in the Czech Republic should decide for themselves whether they should work or not. According to Reuschmeyer (1994: 12), "many experts and officials emphasize the need for women to be able to choose whether to work or stay at home."

State of the Economy

The state of the economy in both Poland and the Czech Republic has had a major impact on women's relative status in the work force. Of all the Eastern European countries, the Czech Republic was the one which made the most successful efforts towards a multi-party democracy and market economy during the early 1990s (Statistical Abstract, 1994: 264). Furthermore, "economic reform was not introduced in the manner of 'shock therapy' and has neither caused massive unemployment nor generally lowered the standard of living" (Basu, 1995: 386). Indeed, the Czech Republic's unemployment rate is the third lowest in the world (Commander and Coricelli, 1995: 91).

Part of the reason for this "quiet" transition is due to the fact that almost a year had been spent developing a stabilization program prior to its introduction. This lengthy preparation period helped the Czech Republic's stabilization program to be a more consistent undertaking, both internally and relative to other aspects of the transition, such as privatization (Slay, 1994: 34). In addition, the Czechs had some initial advantages over the Poles economically. The former Czechoslovakia had perhaps the region's best combination of macroeconomic balance and external creditworthiness prior to the transition.

What does all this mean for Czech women? Since the Czech Republic is not "struggling" to survive in the market, nor feeling the intense pressures of the privatization process, there is not an immediate drive to shed labor. Thus, Czech industries are keeping more women in the work force. If the economy is doing well, why let women go? Thus, due to the relative health of the Czech economy, the unemployment rate for women has not increased.

In Poland, the situation is quite different. Unlike the Czech Republic, Poland introduced economic reform in the manner of "shock therapy." This plan, which was prepared in less than four months, simultaneously liberalized prices and foreign trade, tightened monetary policy, and privatized numerous state-owned industries. In order to become competitive in the new market environment, the old bloated state enterprises had to shed labor. In 1990, when shock therapy was introduced, an average of 100,000 persons joined the ranks of the unemployed each month. In December 1990, women made up 50.9 percent of the unemployed; men constituted 49.1 percent of the unemployed. Although the gap between unemployed men and unemployed women was small, the structure of unemployment and the demands of the labor market for men and women are different. It is much easier for men to find jobs. On average, one of every forty unemployed women in 1990 was offered a new job, compared with one of every fourteen unemployed men (Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994: 616).

Women's Motivation for Employment

There exists yet another striking dissimilarity between Poland and the Czech Republic which affects women's level of employment. This dissimilarity has to do with women's own attitudes toward work. This returns us to the initial question of whether women "jumped" or were "pushed" out of the work force in Eastern Europe during transition.

Many women in Poland feel that they have suffered from too much "emancipation" under communism and "fail to see their jobs as an unambiguous benefit worth defending" (Einhorn, 1993: 114).

"Polish women are celebrating their return to the hearth rather than mourning it as defeat or even temporary retreat. From this perspective, current ideology about women's primarily domestic role need not necessarily be interpreted as the state's Machiavellian attempt to mask the necessity of making cuts in the labor force."

In general, Eastern European women define feminism differently than Western women--i.e., in terms of the right to stay home. This is particularly true among Polish women. Western-style feminist groups are small and generally associated with socialism, which was discredited immediately after the fall of communism. Interviews with Polish women reveal that many view their inferior status as biologically rather than socially determined (Einhorn, 1993: 60). Interviewees claim that they want to regain the femininity which they lost under socialism.

"The widely held view that state socialist "emancipation" forced women to neglect their maternal role and made them unattractive, old before their time, contributes to this sense of women being happy to rediscover their womanhood through their caring role within the family" (Einhorn 1993: 64).

Thus, many Polish women are accepting the notions put forth by the Catholic Church and national ideologies which emphasize the return of women to the home. Many of these women view this as true "liberation," and if women in Poland are "celebrating" their return to the home, they will not view their jobs as worth defending.

Women in the Czech Republic, on the other hand, have a higher level of motivation to remain in the work force. This is not to say that some of these women do not want to work, only that many Czech women find their jobs fulfilling and rewarding and thus do not want to return to the home. Studies of the Czech Republic reveal that women "obtain status, experience, skills in their jobs, they find financial independence, many of them fulfill themselves in and identify with their work" (Einhorn, 1993: 141). Many women are, in fact, excited about the possibilities to work in a public arena that is no longer monopolized by a repressive state (Basu, 1995: 390).

Furthermore, many of these Czech women believe it is their prerogative to decide for themselves whether to work or not. Women intellectuals are breaking new ground and are opening up a space--unthinkable just a few years ago--in which women's issues can be considered at all. The verdict of one survey taken in the Czech Republic at the end of 1992 is as follows: "Women in the Czech Republic will not be silenced. And they will not be pushed into the home either" (Corrin, 1992: 123). The Political Party of Women and Mothers, a very vocal and active group in the Czech Republic, aims to improve women's representation at the top, and encourages women to become politically active, to protect the weakest and the socially disadvantaged in society, and to provide information about women's rights. Thus, many women in the Czech Republic are encouraging other women to stand up for their rights so that their concerns and frustrations will not be pushed aside or lost amongst the many other pressing issues and problems of transition.

These results unveil the fact that, after the fall of communist in Eastern Europe, women in Poland are traveling a much more arduous path to democracy than are women in the Czech Republic. Polish women, however, are not alone. Many other women in Eastern Europe are dealing with this new concept of the woman as well. Women are trying to discover their position in these "transformed" societies and this is a very trying task. They are constantly facing obstacles from every direction of society which hinder their own hopes for inner happiness and harden their spirits.

If something is to be done about this increase in the female unemployment rate, women will have to have a strong voice in the political and economic spheres. Einhorn writes, "For women to defend the right to work as one of the equal citizenship rights guaranteed them at least in principle by the new democracies, the role of formal and informal involvement on their own behalf will be central" (Einhorn, 1993: 142). The role of women's political organizations and female intellectuals in shaping Czech attitudes about women should be stressed here. These factors go far in explaining the relative success of women in the Czech work force.

It is impossible, within the present research design, to determine which of the three variables is most salient. We

cannot say, for instance, that the mode of economic transition is the key factor determining women's participation in the work force. It is clear, however, that this is a crucial time for women in Eastern Europe and they must decide for themselves what it is that will truly give them emancipation.

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