post-communism: women's lives in transition

The social and political changes that occurred in post-communist countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought with them transition towards market economies, political pluralism and democracy. They led to the opening of borders of the former communist countries, enabling an influx of positive as well as negative influences. Even those changes with generally positive impacts often carry in their wake negative consequences in the lives of ordinary people. The most dramatic consequences of social transition are manifested in a significant rise in unemployment, the impoverishment of a large part of the population and the loss of many social benefits. Most people lost their previous social security benefits and, while communism was generally characterized by 'equality in poverty' and by the recognition of formal rights, dramatic societal transition was the source of existential problems and serious stress. This was further intensified by the fact that, at the same time, the import of both a neoliberal economic system and its ideology and consumerist spirit urged people to achieve their 'American dream' at any cost.

The transition occurring on a macro level has provoked numerous transitions in the lives of individual women and men. There are clear empirical indications that gender relations are also in transition: the rate of female participation in the new democratic parliaments is less than under state socialism; women are overrepresented among those who are unemployed; reproductive rights secured during socialism have been challenged; women's domesticity is widely portrayed as a social virtue; pornography has come to symbolize freedom, and the marketing of women's bodies is rising. In sum, the transition toward neoliberal capitalism is accompanied by the re-traditionalization of gender roles, both regarding the division of labour and sexuality. As Peggy Watson noted, the creation of market economies in Eastern Europe 'fundamentally entails the construction of a 'man's world' and the simultaneous propagation of masculinity in the public sphere, with domestication and the marketing of women. The degradation of feminine identity is an inevitable corollary of this process' (Watson, 1993: 472).

Social change in post-communist countries, together with war-related changes in some of them, has had a negative impact on women's vulnerability to different forms of violence, especially to domestic violence, sex trafficking and sexual harassment in the work place. These influences were mediated by

changes in social and economic status, as well as in the gender and ethnic identities of both women and men (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2002).

However, alongside these economic difficulties and related negative changes, the many positive changes occurring must be recognised and celebrated. One of the most important changes is reflected in the development of the women's movement and women's self-organising that is seen, for instance, in women's claims for new rights and protests against the erosion of previously (at least formally) recognised rights. Women's advocacy, although faced with many obstacles and resistance as the new economic systems have developed, has led to some important achievements. Prime examples in Serbia include legal changes that improve women's protection from domestic violence, marital rape and trafficking, and in more general terms, the emergence of more women-friendly institutions.

This issue of *Feminist Review* focuses on the varying experiences of women living in the post-communist 'transition countries' of Central and Eastern Europe. These include women's experiences of economic and legal change, of changes in gender roles, of domestic violence, sexual harassment in the work place or trafficking. The impact of the transition from communism and of ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia on family relationships and domestic violence is considered. Women's self-organising, their work as activists for advocacy and as participants in the truth and reconciliation process, are explored, and the risks facing women with mental disabilities in Central and Eastern Europe and the Newly Independent States are examined.

Contributions from authors both experiencing and researching post-communist transition shed light on numerous aspects of transition in the lives of women in Central and Eastern Europe. In their articles, Monika Platek and Kristina Morvai show the discrepancy between formal rights and gender stereotypes and discrimination in Poland and Hungary, respectively. In a polemical piece, Monika Platek draws attention to the strong patriarchal influence in all spheres of social life, its embodiment in language and the difficulties of achieving women's full participation in post-communist political life. Using both her personal experience and her research, Kristina Morvai shows how the backlash against feminism is a consequence of the perception that the struggle for women's rights is imposed by the West and so is alien to Hungarian culture, or the rejection of feminism as an ideological reminder of communism. In addition, Morvai stresses how difficult it is to advocate for legal change relating to domestic violence and sexual crime in societies where patriarchal stereotypes are so alive and where there is increasing concern to protect the private sphere from state interference.

The negative consequences of transition on women's lives have increased women's vulnerability to violence in Serbia, Macedonia, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria as Sanja Čopić, Milena Stateva, Nadya Kozhouharova and Ljiljana Dobrosavljević-Grujić document, respectively. Each of the articles stresses

the interconnection of gender, class and ethnicity. In addition, Éva Szeli and Dea Pallaska point out the triple discrimination facing (and the invisibility of) mentally disabled women and the urgent need for changes in social attitudes toward them in post-communist countries.

However, a number of articles highlight the positive outcomes of women's advocacy in terms of the legal and institutional changes that are providing increased protection for victims of violence, achieved both on an international level, specifically within the EU, and in individual countries. The interconnection between international and national efforts is especially important when sex trafficking in women from Eastern and Central Europe to EU countries is in question, and this is why Jo Goodey's article is so important in providing a fuller picture of strategies for protecting trafficked women on both sides of the 'Fortress Europe' border.

Apart from making visible the experience of women in societies undergoing transition, this issue of *Feminist Review* also makes visible feminist research, analyses and activism, which have developed over the last decade. This is apparent in most of the articles, but particularly in Andjelka Milic's account of the results of a survey of the women's movements in Serbia and Montenegro, which emphasizes the movements' social visibility and degree of acceptance by the general public and the state authority. My own report on women's truth and reconciliation initiatives in Serbia, which draws attention to efforts made by women in the struggle for peace in societies severely damaged by dictatorship, ethnic conflicts and war is part of this picture of women's activism and the obstacles faced.

Changes in post-communist societies are happening with alarming speed, making the researcher's task of documenting these changes a difficult one. Although substantially similar, transitions on both macro or micro levels can vary considerably from country to country, meaning that caution is required about any regional generalizations. With this in mind, *Post-communism: women's lives in transition* gives a taste of current research into the experience of women living in selected Central and Eastern European contexts.

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references

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