

# Gender Issues in Eastern Europe

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## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to indicate a working agenda of Eastern European gender issues and to generate critical reflection and further research questions.

Although many alternative definitions exist, Eastern Europe is identified here as the totality of postcommunist countries (from ex-East Germany to the ex-USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] countries, including Russia) that are now undergoing a process of transition to democracy and a market economy (see map). Despite past similarities caused by the sharing of the same type of political oppression, these countries differ somewhat in their treatment of gender, partly due to their precommunist past, partly due to their particular socioeconomic and historical circumstances. Thus, any generalizations drawn here must be taken with a grain of salt, and one must remember that neither the category of women nor the concept of Eastern Europe, or postcommunism for that matter, is monolithic.

## BACKGROUND

One of the difficulties confronting gender analyses for this area is that Eastern European societies are not used to nor equipped with the tools that would allow them to analyze their issues in terms of gender (Frink, 2001). Indeed, in some languages the term gender either does not exist or implies an often radical redefinition of existing terms (Funk & Mueller, 1993). In many cases, Eastern European feminists need to learn or create a vocabulary and a space to talk about women's issues, often having to face opposition, ridicule, and marginalization from a profoundly patriarchal society. One of the reasons for this is that totalitarian regimes were solely concerned with class struggle above all other societal inequities. While women's issues were discussed under communism, some authors (Miroiu, 2004)

claim that one cannot speak of communist feminism as an ideology on account that communism promotes neither individual rights nor personal autonomy. This argument seems to be supported by many Eastern European feminist researchers, who see a basic incompatibility between feminism and the communist denial of subjectivity and individualism, its universalism, and its collectivism (Funk & Mueller, 1993). Since access to information under communism was severely restricted, the issues on the agenda of Western feminism did not truly appear on the Eastern European intellectual market until after 1989, and even then they appeared as a trickle.

One striking commonality of basically all the former communist states in Eastern Europe is that they regarded equality between sexes as a fait

*Figure 1. Map of Eastern Europe (Source: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/>)*



accomplish (see Funk & Mueller, 1993; Gal & Kligman, 2000a), as communism had postulated it. Since this supposed equality had never been questioned under communism, and since other more stringent issues deemed urgent attention at the time (marketization, economic stability, political transition, sweeping institutional reforms, etc.), the emergence of a serious dialogue about women's issues was often slow and met with opposition from women themselves. East European women scholars appropriated, rejected, or made Western feminism problematic in a dialogue that has known both successes and failures (Funk & Mueller, 1993; Renne, 1997). Newly arisen feminist issues also had to face a deeply ingrained antifeminist ideology, which survived communism, perestroika, and transition as well.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, much of the enthusiasm and hope with which the new free nations met a democratic era gave way to the harsh realities of the transition to a market system: job insecurity, unemployment, inflation, poverty, unpopular reforms, social unrest, and in some areas, violent ethnic war. Although the changes were felt by society as a whole, women were particularly affected, and researchers generally agree that the anticommunist revolution led to losses for women in terms of civil, economic, and political rights, and even provided "another breeding ground for substantial discrimination against women" (Wejnert, Spencer, & Drakulic, 1996, p. xiv).

## **CRITICAL WOMEN'S ISSUES IN EASTERN EUROPE**

### **Reproductive Policies**

These were some of the first issues raised by the newly free states, as Gal and Kligman (2000a, 2000b) point out. The lingering presence in public and political debates of abortion, contraception, sterilization, and policies related to sexuality and family (from rape to day care) indicates the importance of reproductive policies, despite their not entering the realm of public consciousness as gender issues but as political and ideological problems. Although they are similar in that they treat reproduction as a very important political issue, Eastern European states

vary widely in their reproductive policies. In Poland, the renewed influence of the Polish Catholic Church led to severe restrictions on abortion and to debates that still continue in parliament; a similar situation exists in Hungary. Romania is an extreme case: After years of very restrictive antiabortion regulations determined by Ceausescu's pronatal policies, the second official decree after the dictator's fall in December 1989 was lifting the ban on abortion. In Romania, like in Stalinist Russia, women with more children were conferred the title of heroine mothers, and childless families had to pay higher taxes. Ethnonationalism played a role in natality policies also in Hungary and ex-Yugoslavia: Making the members of a nation (of a certain ethnicity) was the women's duty and ensured the propagation and prosperity of that nation. That is why, for example, rape was used as a weapon of war in the former Yugoslavia: Apart from attacking the women, in the cases where it resulted in children, it ensured the ostracizing of those mothers and children by their own culture while perpetuating the aggressor's ethnicity (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2002). To date, abortion rights are restricted and even threatened in many Eastern European countries (with the exception of Romania).

### **Family Roles and Employment**

Most communist states are similar in that women were present on a large scale in the paid workforce (largely because at least two salaries were required to sustain a family), but they held overwhelmingly feminized jobs (secretarial, health, education, textiles) and low-paid, low-authority positions. Also, extended maternity leaves both enabled women to work and cemented their traditional role in the household, while also serving to "legitimize gender inequality and discrimination in employment" (Funk & Mueller, 1993, p. 7). The drastic changes during the transition (e.g., higher unemployment, lack of funds for day care, etc.) led in many cases to women's ambivalent positions toward work and family. Wejnert et al. (1996) remark that women were the first to lose their jobs during the postcommunist downsizing. In many countries, these factors led to cultural expectations of women as being primarily mothers and housewives. One strong

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