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**Gender and Post-socialist Welfare States in Central Eastern  
Europe: Family Policy Reforms in  
Poland and the Czech Republic Compared**

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## I. Introduction

Since 1989, post-socialist<sup>1</sup> Central and Eastern European countries have significantly reformed their social policies and social security systems. One of the key challenges in so doing was balancing the tension between a tradition of - and in some countries continued commitment to - extensive welfare provisioning and substantive income redistribution through the state on the one hand, and the residualist social policy set-up advocated by the currently dominant global neoliberal economic framework on the other. Among the multiple challenges faced during the reform process, abolishing gender inequality was given little, if any, priority. Nevertheless, the reforms have had important gender implications.

Both Poland and the Czech Republic faced the “competing demands of building capitalism and democracy” at the beginning of the 1990s (Orenstein 2001: 6). Yet both countries responded somewhat differently: Poland chose a rapid and radical economic transformation strategy - “shock therapy”. In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, a mix of neoliberal and social democratic elements of reforms was combined into a “social liberal strategy of reform” (Orenstein 2001: 7).

Both countries also followed different reform paths in the field of social policy. During the 1990s Poland moved further than other post-socialist countries in the direction of a residualist and familial model of a welfare state, scaling down state involvement in the provision of social protection, and promoting individual responsibility and - de-facto, if not always explicitly - greater reliance on the family for the provision of wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> Reforms in the Czech Republic also revoked important elements of the inherited universalist tradition of welfare-state provisioning. On the whole, however, Czech legislative discourses on social policy continued to refer more explicitly to social solidarity. A higher level of state involvement as well as a greater commitment to state-sponsored income redistribution was maintained.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “real-existing socialism”, “real socialism” and “state socialism” are used here interchangeably, to distinguish the Central and Eastern European regimes from the ideals of socialism as formulated by theorists like Marx. See True 2003: 181, quoting Cox 1991. In this spirit, “Post-socialism”/“post-socialist” is used to denominate the period after 1990.

<sup>2</sup> The ironies of a discourse on greater individual responsibility which in fact has women in the family the responsibility picking up the slack is not unknown to feminists.

Gender has been only a marginal concern in post-socialist reform processes. To illustrate the dimensions of change, and as one way to explore the broader gender dynamics of social policy reforms in post-socialist Central Europe, this paper undertakes an analysis of family benefit reforms after 1989. Focusing on reforms of family benefits, including maternity and childcare benefits, as well as transfers to families,<sup>3</sup> it analyses how and why, during the post-1989 situation, “costly” benefits and services supporting women’s dual role as worker and mother - a feature of the socialist past often considered “women-friendly” (Wolchik & Meyer 1985) - changed dramatically. The reform trajectories of family benefits are key elements in the ongoing process of change of the institutional and social environment in which gender relations are negotiated.<sup>4</sup>

Feminist research has pointed to the fact that it is not the degree of state intervention as such, but the particular kind of policies that shape gender relations.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, as state-organized mediators between paid employment and unpaid care work, family benefits are a central instrument of welfare states to shape gender relations. An analysis of family benefit reforms needs to look at three main areas and their intersections: (1) the legacy of benefit systems, (2) the overall economic and political shifts in family policy since 1989, including the gendered values of key reform actors, as well as (3) the power dynamics between reform actors, including among other things the relative strength of women’s voices. I deal with each of these issues below in a comparative fashion.

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<sup>3</sup> The specific benefits included in the analysis differ in the two countries. In the Czech Republic, the analysis focuses on the maternity benefit, child allowance, social allowance and parental allowance. In Poland, maternity benefit, childcare benefit, child-raising allowance, family allowance, alimony fund, guaranteed periodic benefit and benefits for pregnant women and women raising children have been included.

<sup>4</sup> For earlier analyses of post-socialist reforms of social services from a gender perspective, see Einhorn 1993, Funk & Mueller 1993, Aslanbeigui 1994, Kligman 1994, Lobodzinska 1995, among others.

<sup>5</sup> Feminist comparative research on Western welfare states has found larger state involvement not necessarily positively related to more gender equity (e.g. Sainsbury 1996). Instead, feminists have emphasized that variation in the type of state intervention as well as embedded family models and the organization of unpaid care work may be more relevant for women and the goal of promoting gender equality (e.g. Lewis 1997, Sainsbury 1996, 1999).

## **II. The legacy of economic and social policies**

Three main features characterize the gendered patterns of post-WW II economies and labor markets in real socialist Central Europe.<sup>6</sup> First, women were integrated into the labor market in unprecedented numbers, in particular into the industrial sector. This represented a significant change compared to pre-WW II economic structures. As a result, by Western European standards, employment rates of women were high throughout Central and Eastern Europe under Communist party rule.

Second, greater participation of women in employment led to a partial breakdown of gender stereotypes in occupations. Women occupied professions and posts from which they had largely been excluded prior to the take-over of the Communist parties. However, both vertical and horizontal gender segregation of employment opportunities prevailed. Professions continued to be coded “male” or “female”, employing a majority of men or women, respectively. And women were not found in posts of higher responsibility in numbers commensurate with their overall employment participation.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, a gender gap in wages survived all commitments to equality. Despite the Communist party’s rhetoric and formal commitments, as illustrated for example in the early ratifications of internationally binding legislation, such as ILO Convention 100 on equal pay for equal work and work of equal value, women earned considerably less than men in wide sectors of the economy.<sup>8</sup>

### **Family policy in pre-1989 welfare states**

At the end of the 1980s Poland and Czechoslovakia<sup>9</sup> had elaborate systems of social security benefits (Deacon 1992; Castle-Kanerová 1992; Millard 1992).<sup>10</sup> Support for

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<sup>6</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the gendered patterns of economic development after 1945 (and the impact of economic reforms after 1990), see Fodor 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Note, however, that both horizontal and vertical segregation were less marked in CEE when compared to many Western European countries during the same time period.

<sup>8</sup> Poland ratified ILO Convention 100 on equal pay for equal work and work of equal value (1953) in 1954, the Czech Republic in 1957.

<sup>9</sup> Unless noted otherwise, data before 1993 used here relate to Czechoslovakia as a whole, thereafter to the Czech Republic.

families included childcare benefits and leave schemes, complemented by a state-sponsored system of crèches and kindergarten (which was, however, far less extensive in Poland than in Czechoslovakia). In addition, the prices for a number of essential products for children were subsidized by the state.<sup>11</sup>

This family benefit system was profoundly gendered. It supported a high employment rate of women, by helping women workers to combine their dual roles as employees and mothers. Benefits and rewards for motherhood enabled the state to include women into the system of full, but not necessarily freely chosen, employment.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, men were not explicitly addressed as workers *and* fathers, or provided support to combine employment with family responsibilities. Men were even legally excluded from a variety of family benefits, especially from childcare leave schemes. Only under exceptional circumstances, such as the death of the mother, could men claim most of the family-related benefits.

Real-socialist family policy thus reinforced a very particular gendered division of labor within the family and society: Pre-socialist gender role models and cultural stereotypes were maintained, while women's economic independence was strengthened (Čermáková 2000: 42). Family benefits embodied a real-socialist notion of a "good" family, reflecting at the same time persistent conservative and patriarchal values of leading decision-makers - women were valued particularly as unpaid caretakers and homemakers, while it was nevertheless recognized that they were paid workers as well (Čermáková 2000; Seibert 2001).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gal and Kligman refer to East Central European states in socialism as a "kind of (failed) welfare state, if only by the classic definition that a welfare state aims to secure the basic needs of its populace" (Gal and Kligman 2000, p. 70)

<sup>11</sup> When highlighting the comprehensiveness of welfare state benefits, one should, however, be aware of the serious problems and contradictions within state socialist social policy, including the lack of basic goods and services. A number of authors have explained internal contradictions as a consequence of the subordination of social policy under greater ideological goals (Castle-Kanerová 1992) and of the "virtual monopoly of the state in determining social need" (Millard 1992: 119). For an early comparative overview of the legacy of Eastern European welfare regimes for the period of transformation to market economies, see Deacon 1992.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the coercive aspects of employment, see Gal and Kligman 2000, p. 75f

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, there were some notable particularities of family formation in Central Europe prior to 1989, including a low age at marriage, virtually universal marriage, relatively high divorce and remarriage rates in most countries (not in Poland) and childbearing at a relatively young age (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2000; UNICEF/Monee 2000; Cichocińska 1993). In Czechoslovakia, in 1989 the ages of both women and men at first marriage were the lowest in the region, with women marrying at 21.2 years in the Czech Lands.

In both Poland and Czechoslovakia, public spending on family benefits prior to 1989 was high by international standards. At the end of the 1980s it amounted to 4.4. per cent of GDP in Czechoslovakia, and 3.0 per cent in Poland, higher than in most Western European countries.<sup>14</sup> Relatively, both countries spent a greater share of family benefit expenditure on cash benefits than on in-kind benefits, mainly childcare services (UNICEF/MONEE 1999, Fajth 1996).

Eligibility to most family benefits was linked to employment, and their level wage-based (Kuchařová 2003, Wóycicka 2003). Typically, contributions were deducted directly from payrolls: Czechoslovakia offered maternity leave and benefits, extended maternity leave<sup>15</sup> and a special benefit for a parent to care for a sick child. Poland provided for maternity leave and benefits, childcare benefit (sick-child benefit) and child-raising leave for employed mothers. Other benefits or services such as crèches and kindergarten were often provided through the enterprise, sometimes on-site.

In addition to employment-based benefits, some family benefits were universally available and paid directly from the state budget. Czechoslovakia offered a one-time birth grant and a maternity allowance for mothers. Poland had a child-raising allowance for mothers, as well as a family allowance, which depended on the family income, but not on employment. In 1974, Poland also introduced benefits from an alimony fund to support single parents (de facto single mothers).<sup>16</sup>

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In Poland, women got married at 21.7 years on average (UNICEF/Monee 2000). Motherhood was almost universal: In Czechoslovakia, during the 1980s, about 94 per cent of all women of childbearing age did in fact give birth to a child. According to one survey from the 1980s, almost half of the female population believed “that a woman who dedicates herself only to work and career is not normal” (Čermáková 2000: 85).

<sup>14</sup> Even the economic crisis in Poland during the 1980s with massive shortages of goods did not result in cuts in social security spending.

<sup>15</sup> Before 1989, maternity leave, strictly speaking, and childcare leave together were regularly termed “maternity leave” or “extended maternity leave”. They are mentioned here separately to emphasize their conceptual differences. Maternity leave in the sense of ILO Convention 183 is related to the protection of mother and child in relation to the child’s birth, while “extended maternity leave”, today typically termed “childcare leave”/ “parental leave” is provided to a parent for a temporary absence from employment to raise a child. With respect to the latter, there is no biological reason to restrict it to the mother.

<sup>16</sup> A court order on eligibility for alimony was required. According to the law, the state was supposed to claim the money back from the fathers. No exact data are available on the results of the state’s collection activities. However, it is common knowledge that the enforcement of the state’s claim against non-paying fathers was weak then, and continues to be lax at present.

Maternity leave and benefits were based on long traditions in both countries: Maternity leave was introduced in the Czech Lands in 1948<sup>17</sup>, as was the child allowance to help families cover the costs related to raising children. In Poland, maternity leave and benefits had been introduced as early as 1924. The benefit for caring for a sick child was introduced in 1954.

Parental leave schemes and related benefits were of a more recent origin. Their creation was prompted by a concern about declining birth rates and accompanied by political debates and struggles. In Czechoslovakia, family benefits became an important political issue during from the second half of the 1950s, especially after demographic data indicated a decline in fertility.<sup>18</sup> A flat-rate birth grant was introduced in 1956, and the extended two-year maternity leave in 1970, initially unpaid. At the same time, a maternity allowance was introduced for mothers of two or more children who stayed at home after their maternity leave expired. In Poland, child-raising leave was first introduced in 1968, initially consisting of a one-year leave entitlement without pay. In the 1970s, when demand for labor decreased because of growing economic difficulties, and when demographers reported declining birthrates, the state encouraged women to stay home for longer time periods (Lohmann and Seibert 2003: 78).<sup>19</sup> Unpaid leave was extended to three years in 1972 (Wóycicka 2003: 194). Paid leave for two years was introduced only in 1980 in response to popular demand, and as a concession of the Communist government to the opposition Solidarity trade union which had initiated a campaign on the issue. A great number of Polish women took advantage of the paid childcare leave because the benefits in fact secured a decent standard of living for the mother, and the supply and quality of institutional childcare did not satisfy the demand in

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