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DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR RESEARCH

WORKING PAPER

***THE SITUATION OF WOMEN
IN HUNGARY, POLAND AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC***

Women's Rights Series

FEMM 102 EN

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Publisher: European Parliament
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Author: Dolores MORONDO

Editor: Victoria GARCIA MUÑOZ
Division for Policies on Social Affairs, Women, Health and Culture
Directorate General for Research
Tel: +352) 4300 27769
Fax: +352) 4300 27720

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FOREWORD

This report attempts to describe the development of the legal and empirical situation regarding equal treatment and opportunities for men and women in three countries of Central Europe which have applied to join the European Union, namely Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

The transition in these countries to liberal regimes and market economies is involving a radical change in their political, economic and social structures.

The reports produced by the **Commission of the European Communities**¹ following the application by these countries to join the European Union are extremely brief as regards equal opportunities and treatment between men and women, particularly if we bear in mind the complexity of this issue and the extent of the polemic it arouses in the European Union itself². The report on Poland is the only one which mentions “the considerable difference in salaries for men and women”, even though Polish legislation takes account of Community provisions on equal opportunities and the need to legislate in relation to “paternal” leave³. The reports on Hungary and the Czech Republic simply contain a modest statement to the effect that the main Community provisions in this area are covered by the national laws of both countries⁴. However, the frugality of these comments, doubtless motivated to a large extent by the lack of decision-making weight carried by social issues in the Union⁵ and by the difficulty of measuring and assessing the phenomenon of discrimination, did not satisfy the European Parliament’s **Committee on Women’s Rights**, not to mention other more critical organisations. In the draft

¹ Commission Opinion on Hungary’s Application for Membership of the European Union COM (97) 2001 final; Commission Opinion on Poland’s Application for Membership of the European Union COM (97) 2002 final; Commission Opinion on the Czech Republic’s Application for Membership of the European Union COM (97) 2009 final.

² A good example is the angry criticism and tense debates which followed the Kalanke judgment.

³ Commission Opinion on Poland’s Application for Membership of the European Union COM (97) 2002 final, p. 82-83.

⁴ Commission Opinion on Hungary’s Application for Membership of the European Union COM (97) 2001 final, p. 77; Commission Opinion on the Czech Republic’s Application for Membership of the European Union COM (97) 2009 final, p. 77.

⁵ The decisive or sole factors are economic and financial, not only with respect to the enlargement of the Union, but also in other areas of fundamental importance such as the adoption of the single currency.

opinion issued on 16 September 1997, women MEPs expressed **fears that “there may be more problems than Agenda 2000 has led us to believe”**.

Researching these issues is, however, an arduous task, both for reasons relating to the objective of the report in itself and for methodological reasons.

Since a study on the nature and potential manifestations of discrimination goes beyond the limits of this report, two areas were selected as representative of the situation of women: **political presence and employment situation**.

First and foremost, it must be stated that while these areas have traditionally been regarded as illustrating the situation of women and of equal treatment, **they are not independent** of other circumstances and conditions in other areas of social and personal life. Statistics on the presence of women in either one of these two areas are difficult to grasp without a general view of the life of women.

We end this description of this first problem, linking it to the methodological problems involved: this general view is difficult to apprehend in figures. This in itself is due to the invisibility of women and their problems. We could gain an insight into the situation of women more easily and, above all, more comprehensively and richly, if we could use methodology that was qualitative rather than quantitative. In other words apply a method which validates and accords credibility to **the related experience of women**.

Second, a study such as this one has serious **methodological problems** relating both to access to data and to the reliability of the latter.

Despite the growing interest in finding out about the situation of women, one thing is certain: it is still difficult to obtain **data broken down** on the basis of sex or impact studies relating specifically to women. Women’s issues are studied sketchily, either as appendices to general studies, with no overall view specifically covering them, or as exceptional cases in a global analysis.

It is also difficult to obtain **up-to-date and systematic information on Central Europe**. In spite of the interest these countries are generating because of their forthcoming accession to the European Union, gathering information on them is difficult, and no doubt hampered by the transition process which means that data change rather frequently.

Both problems are combined in this study: while in general there is little information available on women in Western Europe, the information on women in Central and Eastern Europe is even scarcer. The tendency is to study women en masse, in other words to study not only all women in the same country as though they were homogenous, but also all women in Central and Eastern Europe.

The second methodological problem concerns **the reliability of data**. Even though some data come from quite trustworthy institutions, there are still gaps or mistakes which seriously undermine their reliability.

The lack of systematic information has therefore obliged us to diversify our research sources. As well as conducting research in the libraries and documentation centres of the European Union institutions, we have had to resort to less trustworthy sources, for instance the Internet.

INTRODUCTION

1. Historical background: equality in the countries of Central Europe during the socialist era

The situation of women in the countries of Central Europe prior to 1989 is regarded by most reference documents as paradoxical. Women had **access to education on a par with the more advanced countries of Western Europe**, and greater access to employment than women in the latter. The level of access to education and employment represented considerable progress compared with the situation of women in these countries before the Second World War. The percentage for women on the labour market in Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1940s was around 38%. Forty years later, the figures were 49% for Czechoslovakia, 48.5% for Hungary and 45.5% for Poland. During the same period, in Hungary, the percentage of women working rose from 35% to 74% (excluding workers on maternity leave)⁶.

However, recent critics agree that **despite this emancipation, women did not have as much power** as might be thought at first sight (and as some women in the West believed, and as the governments of these countries boasted): women earned on average 30% less than men, their jobs were concentrated in the lowest-paid and least-respected sectors, they were maintained as a reserve labour supply and their working conditions depended on the need for extra workers other than men, they had no representatives on decision-making bodies, they were overworked because of their triple roles as mothers, housewives and full-time workers, and they had no control over the importance attributed to their various roles as women, mothers and workers.

⁶ Hübner, S; Maier, F; Rudolph, H: "Women's employment in Central and Eastern Europe: status and prospects", *Structural Change and Eastern Europe: Labour Market and Social Policy Implications*, 1993, P; 216.

A number of studies exist which discuss all of these points, particularly in the United States and in Western Europe. However the figures contrast with the attitude of women in Central Europe, which Zillah Eisenstein has described as “allergic to feminism”⁷. In order to understand this feeling, we must remember that much of the current criticism of the situation of women under socialist regimes is of a non-historical nature and is not placed in context, which makes it difficult to understand the problems posed by transition and the current feelings of women in these countries as regards equality and the policies to achieve this. Above all, we must avoid the resistible temptation to adopt a paternalist attitude which supposes that, given the collapse of socialism and the fact that the current regimes are weaker than ours, women are by necessity more oppressed, and in order to improve matters, they must follow our example.

First, it is important to know the historical background against which the emancipation of women in Central Europe developed. According to traditional Marxist thinking, the oppression and discrimination suffered by women were a result of the private property system and the capitalist class structure. The oppressed state of women arose from the bourgeois marriage contract, in which women were regarded as the property of their husbands. The emancipation of women could therefore be achieved by adapting the means of production on a socialist basis (which would also liberate men) and by the entry of women onto the labour market (which in fact made them independent of men).

The emancipation of women in socialist regimes therefore followed this model of entry onto the labour market (access to education may be regarded as a prerequisite).

To achieve efficient integration into the labour market, it was necessary to abolish the labour costs for women of reproduction and childcare. Thus the State, through its state enterprises, shared this responsibility (burden, in economic terms) with women: crèches and children’s homes were established in factories, and from the ‘sixties on, maternity leave and extensions of leave were introduced, which were much longer and more generous compared with Western Europe. Leave was granted to care for sick children, etc⁸. While it is true that these services were not

⁷ Quoted in Karpinski, Eva, “Do Polish Women Need Feminism? Recent Activity of the Parliamentary Women’s Group”, *Canadian Women Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, 16, 1, 1995, p. 91.

⁸ It is true that these services were not introduced in response to public demand, but for macro-economic reasons. For instance, during the period when female labour was needed to industrialise the countries, the State promoted the establishment of public childcare facilities. From the ‘sixties on, when the demand for labour fell, women were encouraged to return to the home to look after their children by means of extended maternity leave, thus reducing the competition for jobs as far

renowned for their quality, they did help to make it possible for women to work in the huge numbers observed prior to 1989.

Of course, with the shift now in the discourse to parity and the sharing of family and domestic responsibilities by men, the situation of women under socialist regimes is described as a “false blessing”: the emancipation of women in these countries resulted in them working full time (due to financial necessity rather than choice) outside the home, without any relief from their traditional responsibilities as mothers and housewives. So at the end of the day they assumed a **dual role, which was exhausting, as workers in the public domain and as carers in the private domain, which meant that the concepts of emancipation and equality left a bitter taste.** The mistake made by socialist ideology was the belief that working was a sufficient - rather than a necessary - factor to achieve equality between men and women.

But if we look at the discourse on equality at that time, we can see some similarities with the situation in the West. Work was regarded - and still is - as the fundamental way of obtaining access to economic independence. The integration of women into the labour market is regarded as an important indicator of the level of equal opportunities. Up until the recent debates on working hours and equality between men and women, women were faced with the alternative of a professional career or a family life.

Moreover, while it is true that the socialist governments intervened to a large extent in relation to childcare, there was strong resistance to changing the traditional division of domestic tasks between men and women: men did not assume more responsibilities, the State did not accord any importance to this issue and the services sector did not develop in line with the needs of the

as men were concerned. Despite this we must not forget that women still had the option of returning to work, and if they decided to remain at home with their children, they received approximately 75% of their salaries, while the years they spent at home were taken into account when calculating their pensions.

population. Resort to help from outside the home or from the extended family, the two types of help which women avail of in Western Europe depending on their financial means, was also less frequent because of the lack of resources of family budgets and because the high level of female occupation meant in many cases that even grandmothers were working.

Another paradox in the situation of women was political activity. In **socialist regimes**, the political involvement of women was guaranteed by means of a **quota system**, with the quotas being increased over the years⁹:

Percentage of women in Parliament

	1950	1970	1985
Czechoslovakia	--	24.6%	29.3%
Hungary	17.2%	19.7%	26.6%
Poland	--	13.5%	20.2%

Source: Adapted from *Central and Eastern European Women: A Portrait*.
European Parliament, Women's Rights Series, W-8, p. 18

⁹ Janu, Ivana, "The Consequences of Political Changes in Europe for the Position of Women: Analysis of Strategies and Methods", *Proceedings from the International Workshop on the Problems of Equality in the Current Period of Transition in the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe*, Council of Europe Press, Strasbourg, 1994, p. 49.

However the quotas simply guaranteed the physical presence of women. As in western democracies, the presence of women followed the **“law of increasing disproportion”**¹⁰: as the importance of the position increases, the number of women occupying such positions drops. Women are represented most at local level, disappearing when it comes to the managerial jobs in parties.

With regard to the political situation of women in socialist regimes, there are **two vital characteristics** which probably affect the current attitude of women in Central Europe to political activity and which are very important as regards possible action in future:

1. Women were regarded as a group who had to be jointly represented with other social groups such as young people or farmers. Therefore they were not considered to be real representatives but rather as something “quaint”. This perception must also be looked at within the more general framework of parliamentary activity in a one-party system.

¹⁰ Rhodie, Escher M., *Discrimination Against Women: A Global Survey*. USA, McFarland and Co., Inc., 1989, p. 232, quoting Putnam.

2. The political activity of women was firmly centralised: the (National) Women's Councils had advisory status in the Central Committees, with no voting rights. Although officially they were akin to non-governmental organisations, in practice they toed the party political line¹¹. Despite the control exerted, feminist activism did emerge in some countries, such as Poland and Yugoslavia, but in general it was regarded by the Communist countries as a bourgeois deviation and a cultural and political threat¹².

2. The transition to a liberal regime and market economy: impact on equality

Transition has had an extremely important impact on the situation of women, but one which is exceedingly difficult to assess and quantify. Transition has brought pluralism and political choice, individual liberties and the market economy. However, in the short term, the change is frequently seen as synonymous with problems, insecurity and regression¹³.

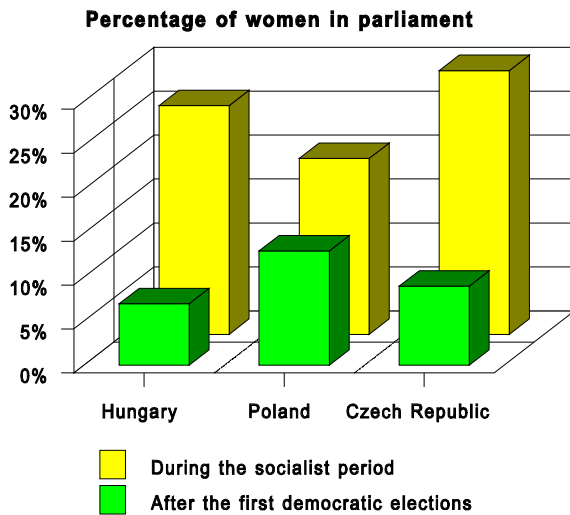
To find out how the transition process is affecting the situation of women, the first thing we must do is abandon a rather convenient attitude of surrendering responsibilities. There is a widespread practice which involves placing the responsibility for the aspects of change we do not like on past actions, interpreting them as the mere and inevitable consequences of these past actions. It is true, as can be seen from recent criticism, that the socialist regimes had their own forms of sexual discrimination, such as the horizontal and vertical segregation of labour markets, the sexual division of work in the private domain, etc. We must not, however, use this discovery as an excuse for thinking that, since this fact has been denounced, transition is neutral as regards sex. **For transition is not neutral**, in relation to two aspects in particular. On the one hand, transition has considerably shaken the pillar on which the emancipation and independence of women were based (in other words **social policies**), thereby turning women into a (more) vulnerable group as far as economic change is concerned.

¹¹ "The Impact of Economic and Political Reform on the Status of Women in Eastern Europe", *Proceedings of a United Nations Regional Seminar*. Vienna, 8-12 April 1991, United Nations, New York, 1992, p. 12.

¹² It must be pointed out that, despite the "de-communisation" of political thought in these countries and the rejection of the old Communist views, this legacy of opposition to feminism has been maintained intact and has even been taken advantage of by the re-emerging conservative and religious movements.

¹³ "The price of transition in the East", *FLW Women*, March 1996.

Furthermore, transition has also introduced the emphasis placed by liberal ideology on **individualism and a return to certain conservative values**, reinforcing the family as the “natural” sphere of women. These two ideological trends - liberalism and conservative - have



proven to be a predominant force in the economic and social restructuring of the countries of Central Europe¹⁴.

One of the consequences of the reform process on the situation of women - in fact the one on which all the analyses have concentrated - is **the drop in political involvement**. This argument is underpinned by the statistics concerning the seats occupied by women in the parliaments before and after the first democratic elections.

The result is impressive: after the first elections, the percentage of seats occupied by women dropped from 30% to 9% in Czechoslovakia, from 26% to 7% in Hungary and from 20% to 13% in Poland.

Sources:

¹⁴ Holzner, Brigitte, *Gender and Social Security in Central and Eastern Europe and the Countries of the Former Soviet Union*, ISS & NEDA, The Hague, 1997, p. 19.

Figures on Czechoslovakia and Hungary adapted from "Central and Eastern European Women: A Portrait", *Women's Rights Series*, W-8, European Parliament,.

Figures on Poland in "Poland. The Impact of Economic and Political Reform on the Status of Women in Eastern Europe", *Proceedings of a United Nations Regional Seminar*, Vienna 8-12 April 1991, United Nations, New York, 1992.

The main reason given for this reduction was the abolition of the quota system for the representation of women which was in force prior to 1989, ensuring that women had a certain number of seats. But if we analyse these figures in conjunction with other indicators on the political activity of women, the explanation becomes more complex. **Women's representation in parliament is in line with their general political involvement:** as we will see in the chapter on the countries selected, the percentage for political activity (membership of political parties, presence on electoral registers, etc.) remain constant and virtually equal (even sometimes lower than) to parliamentary representation¹⁵.

¹⁵ See *Countries Selected* for the figures in the sections on Hungary and Poland.

The reasons put forward to explain the lack of attraction of the political arena for women turn out to be the same as those in Western Europe: women are already very busy with their families and jobs, politics are seen as something “essentially male” because of the aggression, competitiveness, etc. involved, and women cannot identify fully with the thinking of political parties and agree to toe the party line¹⁶.

The percentages for political representation of women in these countries tend to be substantially lower than the European average. Nonetheless, **the representation of women in parliament is similar to that of Community countries such as Belgium, Ireland and Italy**¹⁷.

Even with this, the opinions mooted in Central Europe reveal a rather ambivalent image of the political activity of women. In Poland for instance, women involved in politics play a very active and important role, both in the government and in the parliament, but at the same time the Women’s Parliamentary Group is ridiculed by the press and by several male colleagues. In Hungary, although opinion polls on politicians show a clear preference for men, figures have been collected showing that in constituencies in which the candidates for local elections are not nominated by the parties, there are more women elected than men.

Be that as it may, women in positions of power in politics are in a minority. One of the problems arising from the small number of women involved is the tendency to consider them (and their views and comments) as being irrelevant, minority views.

Holzner and Truong note **the lack of power of women in the transition process** as a result of the new image and new position of women in society. “Given the lack of power of women in the transition process, their identity is being recreated, as can be seen from the following:

- a) control of concepts of maternity and the reproductive cycle for various reasons (eg. pro-life and anti-abortion movements to promote national reconstruction and ethnic

¹⁶ “Finding their own Voice”, *Voice-Society*, May 1997.

¹⁷ Figures for the comparison taken from “Men and Women in Politics. Democracy still in the making. A World Comparative Study”, *Reports and Documents* Series, No. 28, Interparliamentary Union, Geneva, 1997.

reinforcement; “periodic unemployment” (in the form of maternity leave) to reduce competition with men for jobs

- b) the shifting of the burden of reproduction to the family as the “natural” and “private” sphere, achieved by means of unpaid work by women, and
- c) profiting from the selling of female and youth sexuality as sexual goods and services. The weakening of the social and economic conditions of women and the growing control by men over the attribution of meaning to female sexuality and to the different roles of the sexes are giving a special character to the reform of relations between men and women¹⁸.”

¹⁸ Holzner, Brigitte, *Gender and Social Security in Central and Eastern Europe and the Countries of the Former Soviet Union*, ISS & NEDA, The Hague, 1997, p. 21-22.

COUNTRIES SELECTED

In this section we will analyse more specifically three of the countries of Central Europe on the threshold of joining the European Union¹⁹, namely Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

Each section focuses on one country, and is divided into three parts:

1) **Legislation concerning equality and women's rights**

Because of transition and the relatively frequent legislative amendments it involves, we cannot guarantee that legislative measures have not been modified or abolished by others, or indicate new interpretations and applications of important and controversial legal measures, some of a constitutional nature. A study of this kind, which is highly recommended, would require specialised cooperation in each country.

2) **Figures on political involvement and the employment situation of women in each country**

These figures, while subject to the limits of accessibility and reliability mentioned above, are intended to provide a more detailed view of the empirical situation of women in each country and thus overcome one of the problems mentioned in the Foreword to this study, namely the fact that women in Central and Eastern Europe are studied as a homogenous group.

3) A third part, entitled "**Voices from ...**", contains comments from opinion polls and by social and economic players, etc. on the situation regarding equality and women in each country.

The information on the three countries is not symmetrical because of the methodological problems mentioned in the Foreword and because of the fact that each country does not accord

¹⁹ Agenda 2000 calculates that their accession will take place during the first decade of the next century.

the same importance to the same issues, hence the information published is based on different interests and circumstances.

I - Hungary

1. Legislation concerning equality and women's rights

1.1 The Constitution

The 1989 Hungarian Constitution comprises a combination of ideal equality between men and women and special protection for women. On the one hand, it contains a **general clause on equality before the law** (Art. 57), with specific references to human and civil rights (Art. 70/A), the right to equal pay for equal work (Art. 70/B) and the right to social security (Art. 70/C). In addition Art. 70/A contains a paragraph 3) laying down a commitment to promote the achievement of equality by means of measures to remove de facto inequalities (which promote equal opportunities). Like the Polish Constitution, the Hungarian Constitution contains an article (**Art. 66**) which specifically concerns equality between men and women "with respect to all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights". However, the same article contains two other provisions concerning women only: the first one describes the special protection and support to which mothers are entitled before and after the birth of their children. The second one, which is much more controversial from an equality point of view, provides for special rules to protect women at work.

1.2 Other legislation²⁰

In 1961 Hungary ratified the 1958 Convention on Discrimination (in employment and professional occupations). The 1968 Labour Code therefore contained regulations on sex discrimination. Paragraph 5, Section 1 of the current **Labour Code** states that "**with regard to employment, discrimination against employees based on sex is prohibited ...** as well as discrimination for any other reason not relating to employment. Discrimination arising

²⁰

The information given below is based on an article written by a Hungarian Supreme Court Judge, Jozsef Radnay, in "European Labour Courts. International and European Labour Standards in Labour Court Decisions, and Jurisprudence on Sex Discrimination", Bronstein, A. And Thomas, C. (Ed.), *Labour-Management Relations Series*, No. 82, ILO, Geneva, 1995.

unequivocally because of the nature or type of the job shall not be deemed to be harmful discrimination”.

This provision applies to all employees, although there are special provisions relating specifically to:

- manual and intellectual workers and employees (Labour Code, paragraph 1)
- civil servants (Act XXIII of 1992, paragraph 71, Section 2)
- state employees (Act XXXIII of 1992, paragraph 3)
- the armed forces (Ministerial Order 4/1993/IV.30/HM)
- the police (Ministerial Order 11/1992/VIII.3/BM)
- the border police (Ministerial Order 11/1992/VIII.3/BM)
- the fire brigade (Ministerial Order 11/1992/VIII.3/BM)
- the legal profession (Ministerial Order 14/1992/IX.26/IM)
- customs and tax officials (Ministerial Order 26/1992/XI.12/PM) and
- members of cooperatives with regard to working conditions (Act I, 1992, paragraph 65).

There are also special provisions in force for other activities, such as Act I, 1985, on education.

According to the definition by the Hungarian Supreme Court (Judgment No. 97) **sex discrimination exists when a woman is employed or is working under different (prejudicial) working conditions from those of men without any essential, fair reason for this.**

Despite the fact that the ban on sex-based discrimination is constitutional, there are very few cases in practice, and most relate to pregnancy. In a discrimination case, the discriminatory behaviour of the employer is deemed to be null and void as of right, and the court obliges the employer to continue the employment relationship with the employee without the discriminatory condition. Under Hungarian law, sex-based discrimination is an administrative offence, not an unlawful offence, and the punishment is a fine.

The development of case law has had great importance as far as discrimination is concerned, particularly in cases where the employment contracts of pregnant workers were not renewed or were amended. These amendments are judged to be null and void by the courts (Supreme Court

M.10.204/1975 - Ruling on Labour Act I/26, M.II.10.038/1978 - Jurisprudence ruling 1978/12/538).

The **volume of sex discrimination cases is low and falling**. In times of economic difficulty, employees tend to accept discrimination if this means that they can hold on to their jobs.

There is no public body which supports women who initiate discrimination proceedings. Act LIX 1993 obliges the Public Prosecutor to set right violations of constitutional rights. There are several private organisations which support the plaintiffs and are exerting pressure to bring about changes in the law.

2. Figures on political involvement and the employment situation of women in Hungary

The transition to a market economy has involved a radical change in every aspect of life, for both men and women. For all of those who had become accustomed to a job guaranteed for life, the new situation involved very difficult readjustments: coping with unemployment, dealing with the new phenomenon of competition, changing and adapting training, changing jobs, loss of income and, above all, stress and insecurity.

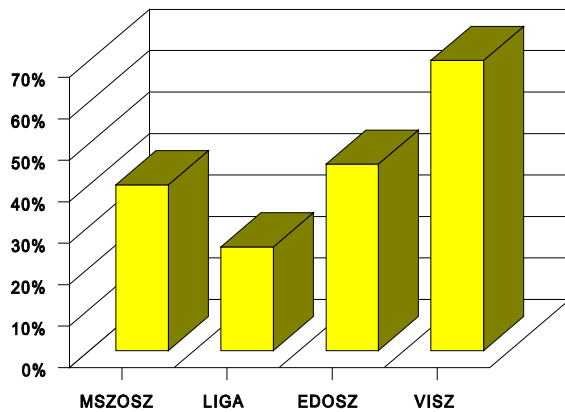
However, for the reasons given in the *Foreword*, we will confine ourselves to two areas only: political involvement and the employment situation of women.

2.1 Women and political involvement

According to the figures for the 1994 May elections²¹, women occupied **11.4% of the seats in the Hungarian Parliament**. However it must be remembered that women accounted for only 9.2% of the candidates. Women represented between 8% and 12% of the candidates on the Hungarian parties' lists. Of the 44 female members of parliament, 21 belong to the socialist party, virtually all of whose women candidates were elected. The Hungarian Democratic Forum is interesting in that its female candidates represented 7.8% of its list, but its elected members account for 15.8% of its delegation.

²¹ "Men and Women in Politics. Democracy still in the making. A World Comparative Study", *Reports and Documents Series, No. 28*, Interparliamentary Union, Geneva, 1997, p. 14.

Level of female trade union membership, 1992



According to United Nations figures²² for the same year (1994), there were no women in ministerial posts and only 6% in sub-ministerial jobs. These figures are much more revealing if we remember that, in Hungary, 58% of all administrative and managerial workers are women²³.

It is expected that the **number of women in trade unions** will drop in line with the numbers on the labour market, which will further weaken the position of women.

Women account for 40%-42% of the members of the Hungarian Trade Union Congress (MSZOSZ), and 25% of the members of the Democratic League of Free Trade Unions (LIGA). Both trade unions have a Women's Section.

²² *The World's Women 1995. Trends and Statistics*, United Nations, New York, p. 171.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

More women are involved in the trade unions representing the more female-oriented industrial sectors. Women make up 45% of the members of the EDOSZ, the union of workers in the foodstuffs and tobacco industries²⁴, and 70% of the members of the VISZ (union of hotel workers). They form 58.3% of the members of the Executive in the last trade union. It must be borne in mind that 64.5% of the workers in this sector are women²⁵.

2.2 Women on the labour market

There are **no significant differences** between men and women as far as the **unemployment figures** are concerned, although unemployment is growing more rapidly among women than among men. In addition several factors may have an adverse effect on the possibilities for women of keeping their jobs compared with men, for instance family responsibilities, the low level of representation of women in trade unions and the small numbers undergoing vocational training.

²⁴ Although it must be remembered that there has been a huge increase in the number of small grocery shops and bakeries employing 2-4 people who, as a rule, are not unionised.

²⁵ Fisher, G. And Standing, G., *Structural Change and Eastern Europe: Labour Market and Social Policy Implications*, 1993.

As regards **looking for new jobs**, there are differences between men and women. Statistics from the Employment Office²⁶ show that 20% to 30% of job offers for non-manual workers and 65% to 70% of those for manual workers exclude women. The reasons behind this have very little to do with the type of work. The main reason for the difference is the persistence of traditional attitudes, whereby men are regarded as the breadwinners, and the current trend towards pushing women outside the labour market to reduce unemployment and competition.

This tendency to exclude women is particularly serious if we consider the reduction in the number of job offers.

Another important element relating to the rate of employment of women is the **social policies on children**. Companies own 30% of the crèche facilities that exist. With economic change, the facilities that did not disappear with the companies have been shut down in order to cut back on non-production costs. Many crèches and childcare centres run by the State have also been closed because of budget cutbacks.

At the moment there is considerable pressure, both for domestic and international budgetary reasons²⁷, to cut down on **maternity leave** and leave to care for small children, which is very well-developed in Hungary. Hungarian law guarantees 24 weeks' leave on full pay with the right to return to the job laid down in the employment contract. The leave may be postponed until the child is two years old, with 75% of net pay. Fathers may avail of leave during the second year. During the second year mothers may ask to work part-time.

Eighty-one percent of Hungarian women are in favour of working outside the home, both in principle and in practice, but would prefer to see a shorter working day²⁸. **Reducing working hours** is seen as a measure that would help women to reconcile their professional and family lives. However the legal measures providing for flexible or part-time working hours for mothers

²⁶ Quoted by María Lado at the Institute of Labour Research (Ministry of Labour) in "The Impact of Economic and Political Reform on the Status of Women in Eastern Europe", *Proceedings of a United Nations Regional Seminar*, Vienna, 8-12 April 1991, United Nations, New York, 1992, p. 47.

²⁷ See *Voices from Hungary*.

²⁸ Balint, Eva, "Women in Politics in Hungary", paper for the Seminar *Women in Leadership: Politics and Business*, Vienna, November, 1992, Project Library, Harvard University, No. 2, 1992.

of small children are fairly irrelevant given the lack of willingness on the part of employers. The supply of part-time jobs in Central Europe as a whole is, in general, lower than the demand²⁹.

²⁹ Hübner, S.; Maier, F.; Rudolph, H, "Women's employment in Central and Eastern Europe: status and prospects", *Structural Change and Eastern Europe: Labour Market and Social Policy Implications*, 1993, p. 226.

3. Voices from Hungary

The activities of women's groups in Hungary have been undermined by various economic, social and cultural factors. Katalin Fabian lists the following: a) the ambivalent relationship with socialism; b) the physical and mental exhaustion of women; c) the deterioration of quality of life; d) the traditional image of women; e) anti-feminist feeling and f) the lack of political support³⁰.

But perhaps the most important factor of all is the **attitude of women themselves to equality**. In reaction to the compulsory egalitarianism of the socialist period, women reject the idea of affirmative action measures or special laws. Consequently they are interested only in "**perfect equality**" policies. An example of this quest for "perfect equality" is the situation which arose in the Hungarian Parliament as a result of the 1992 law on sexual harassment³¹. The Association of Hungarian Women supported a bill on sexual harassment but on condition that men and women would be given equal treatment under the law, therefore they requested that men also be protected by this law. The authors of the draft argued that far more women than men were victims of sexual harassment and that it was women who essentially needed this law. The bill was set aside due to lack of agreement between the two sides.

However, this does not mean that there is no concern about the impact which "transition" is having specifically on women. According to Elisabeth Szabo, Chair of the Women's Committee of the Hungarian Trade Union Congress (MSZOSZ), "the economic change which Hungary is going through at the moment is affecting social rights, and the main people concerned are women"³². Nobody thought at the beginning that there would be any losers because of transition

³⁰ Fabian, Katalin, "Unexpressionism? Challenges to the formation of Women's Groups in Hungary", *Canadian Women Studies/Les Cahiers de la femme*, No. 16, 1, 1995, p. 80-84.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Interview with Elisabeth Szabo in "Women's rights under threat", *FLW Women*, March 1996.

apart from those in the upper echelons of the communist regimes. The growing economic and social recession is demonstrating just how mistaken this belief was.

Contrary to what many people may think, **accession to the European Union** is regarded with some fear, since because of this social policies are being decided on the basis of financial criteria or are simply being left on the back burner of the political agenda. In addition, it is feared that membership of the European Union may result in the harmonisation of social rights at a lower level, and Hungary would therefore lose the most advanced social rights in the European Union, for instance maternity leave. The World Bank is already exerting pressure on Hungary to reduce this type of family social benefit³³.

II - Poland

1. Legislation concerning equality and women's rights

1.1 The Constitution

Typical tension as regards equality between the sexes is found in the new Polish Constitution of 2 April 1997. On the one hand, there are articles devoted to equality and, on the other, articles specifically aimed at protecting women, notably in their roles as mothers. This tension is at the root of the debate on equality in many other European countries: how can women be treated equally while at the same time guaranteeing them equality in situations in which the difference is outstanding, without perpetuating stereotypes or forcing them to adopt specific types of behaviour or lifestyles?

With regard to equality, the Polish Constitution, like all western constitutions, contains a **general clause on equality before the law** and the authorities (Art. 32). Discrimination in political, economic and social life is prohibited for any reason whatsoever. This is a general clause which encompasses all motives (ethnic, religious, ideological, social and economic class, age, sex, disabilities, etc.) as well as every sphere of public life. Several other articles in the Constitution refer to this general recognition of equality, for instance equal access to cultural assets (Art. 6),

³³ Ibidem.

equal access to public services (Art. 60), equal protection of private property (Art. 64.2) and equal, universal elections (Art. 96).

However, unlike many western constitutions, the Polish Constitution contains an article expressly devoted to **equality between men and women (Art. 33)**. It is a fairly general clause which recognises that men and women have the same rights “especially in relation to education, employment and promotion, the right to equal pay for work of equal value, to social security, to public office and to receive honours and decorations”. During the debates on the adoption of the Constitution, many people thought this article superfluous. However the Women’s Parliamentary Group established in 1991 highlighted the danger of removing the article from the final text of the Constitution.

The Polish Constitution also contains two articles on protection in general, protection of marriage, the family, maternity and paternity (Art. 18) and on the protection of families in materially and socially difficult situations (Art. 71). There are two articles focusing on women in particular: one concerns the obligation by the authorities to provide special health care for pregnant women (Art. 68.3), while the other one concerns the right of mothers, before and after giving birth, to receive public assistance in accordance with the law (Art. 71.2).

The members of the Polish Women’s Parliamentary Group pointed out that the **emphasis in the Constitution on the essential role of women as mothers** and within the family in fact diminishes women’s rights as citizens and reflects patriarchal attitudes. Women are defined in terms of their sex as mothers, instead of emphasising their equality as individuals³⁴.

1.2 Other legislation

The Polish Women’s Parliamentary Group did not manage to set up an equal opportunities commission under the new constitution. The **Law on Equal Rights** presented in December 1996 was debated for the second time in February 1997. The text states that both men and women enjoy the same rights, and that all sex-based discrimination is illegal. This prohibition is contained in the Constitution. However, the new bill contains an innovative element: the principle of equal representation whereby both sexes must be represented (at least 40%) in

³⁴ Karpinski, Eva, “Do Polish Women Need Feminism? Recent Activity of the Parliamentary Women’s Group”, *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, no. 16, 1, 1995, p. 91.

institutions and organisations whose members are not elected but are appointed or employed by the authorities. According to a recent survey, even when 44% of those questioned declared that they were in favour of increasing the participation of women in public life, 63% did not support this law.

The same Parliamentary Group prepares special reports evaluating the impact of economic change on the family and employment situation of women. With respect to employment measures, the **Women's Parliamentary Group** submitted several innovative proposals on "legislation to protect" women. There are calls for the official introduction of anti-discrimination policies on employment, the granting of leave to fathers to take care of their children, the prevention of sexual harassment at the work place and the use of quotas as a temporary measure to combat systematic discrimination.

The new Abortion Law came into force in March 1993 restricting access for women to abortion. Abortion is now permitted only for medical, legal or eugenic reasons, and account may not be taken of social or economic circumstances. In the area of health there have also been changes in the code of ethics of medical practice which in 1992 abolished gender from the list of categories (race, nationality, religion, class, level of income and political opinions) on the basis of which there can be no discrimination in medical care.

The Women's Parliamentary Group believes that the current sexism and misogyny are a threat not only to the identity of women but also to their health and safety. The parliamentary group has collated statistics on abuse and rape, asking that these be made public. It is also calling for national campaigns against violence against women, for the abolition of patriarchal interpretations of the application of double standards for men and women in criminal law ("blaming the victim"), for the establishment of networks of rape support centres and shelters for women who have been abused, and for the amendment of the divorce law which forces women to remain in abusive and violent relationships.

2. Figures on political involvement and the employment situation of women in Poland

As already mentioned several times, it is difficult to assess the impact of transition on the situation of women since this has not been homogenous but varies according to the areas and social groups to which women belong.

Below are figures relating mainly to the two areas selected: political involvement and employment situation.

2.1 Women and political involvement

The political involvement of women in Poland has obviously varied since 1989. However, it will take some time before it is possible to see what quota of power women have achieved in real terms.

	1987	1993
Parliamentary seats		
Sejm (congress)	20%	13%
Senate	--	13%
Government posts		
Ministerial level	3.4%	6.7%
Sub-ministerial level	0%	11.8%

Source: The World's Women 1995, United Nations, New York, p. 171

As can be seen from the figures in the above table, although there are fewer women in parliament, there has been a **considerable increase** in the numbers occupying decision-making positions: the percentage of women at ministerial level has doubled, while at sub-ministerial level the figure has risen from 0% to 11.8%.

According to former Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka, the real problem is not the percentage of women in each parliamentary committee, but the number of women wishing to play a real part in public life. The figures from the September 1993 elections³⁵ show that while the current 13% of women members of parliament is a fall compared with the 20% guaranteed under the quotas, women accounted for 13.1% of the candidates to the Sejm. With regard to the Senate, where female candidates amounted to only 9.9%, yet 13% of those elected were women. If we remember that in Poland women account for 16% of the members of political parties, we can see

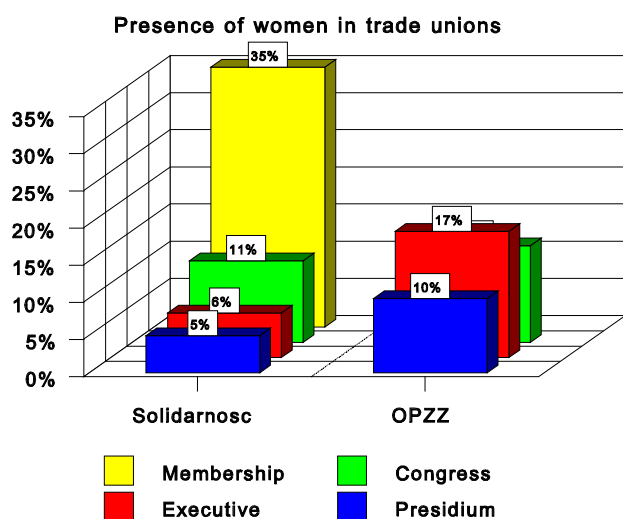
³⁵ "Men and Women in Politics. Democracy still in the making. A World Comparative Study", *Reports and Documents* Series, no. 28, Interparliamentary Union, Geneva, 1997, p. 26.

that they make up a constant proportion of the lists of candidates and of the representation in Parliament.

The question should, therefore, be couched in different terms: not why women have such a low level of representation, but **why women do not want to or cannot take part in politics.**

With regard to the defence of women's interests in the area of employment and in many aspects

relating to government macro-economic policies (wage increases, social policies, collective dismissals, etc.), it is interesting to look at the role played by women in **trade unions**, particularly if, as happens in the European Union, collective bargaining is becoming increasingly important.



The figures in this table relate to December 1992. The graph reflects the presence of women in the two main Polish trade unions: Solidarnosc and the former official National Association of Independent Trade Unions (OPZZ). There are no segregated figures for female membership of the latter. Both trade unions have a Women's Section³⁶.

2.2 Women on the labour market

With the **spectacular growth in unemployment** in Poland since 1990, the labour market has turned into an area in which there is considerable employment discrimination against women.

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The Solidarnosc Women's Section was initially formed in 1989 but was dissolved because of the differences of view between Solidarnosc and the Women's Section on abortion and the consequent resignations/dismissal of several members of the Women's Section (See *Voices from Poland*). It was re-formed in 1992.

The unemployment figures rose from 0.05% in 1989 to 16.4% in 1994. Furthermore the rate of female employment fell from 57% in 1988 to 52% in 1995³⁷. Women account for a little over half of the total unemployed in Poland. In 1995 14% of women workers were unemployed compared with 11.5% of men, and the difference was even greater in urban areas.

³⁷ Mroczkowski, Tomasz, "Women as employees and entrepreneurs in the Polish transformation", *Industrial Relations Journal*, no. 28, 2, 1997, p. 84.

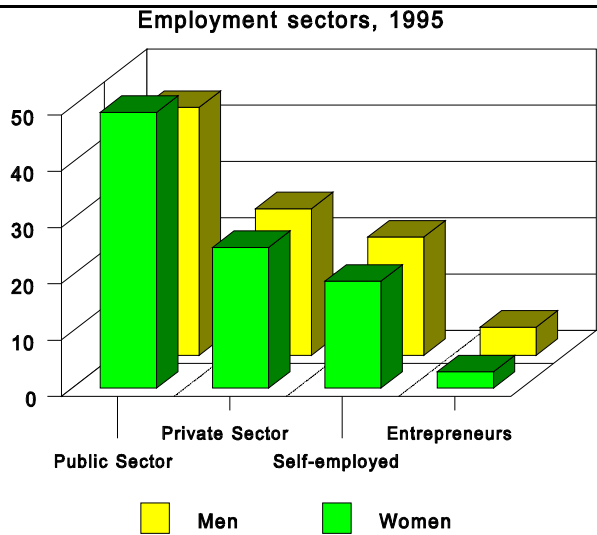
Moreover, women are in a worse position when it comes to finding another job. First of all because in Poland **job advertisements differentiated in terms of sex** are normal. In 1992 there were 143 women unemployed for every job offer aimed at them, compared with 56 men in the same situation. Even the unemployment authorities had different floors for men and women. Second, the situation of women in the selection process is also more fragile, with women usually being asked questions about their family and personal lives. The disadvantage of being a woman is that no other factor alone in itself (for instance youth or computer skills, which are highly appreciated characteristics) is able to compensate for it³⁸.

Another factor in the drop in the female employment rate are the **social policies on children**. Whether intentionally or not, government policy, which has not index-linked allowances per child with respect to inflation and has shut down public crèches, tends to support the theory that the way to end unemployment and reduce social costs at the same time is to send women back to the home to look after their children, instead of having them compete with men on the labour market. Proposals have even been put forward by Solidarnosc to create a **“family salary”**: a man’s salary would be increased by supplementary payments for each child, provided that his wife was not working (this would make women’s work unprofitable in financial terms)³⁹.

For women who keep on working, the working conditions have worsened, employers ignore laws on equality and non-discrimination, and, faced with the fear of losing their jobs, women feel obliged to accept poor working conditions.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 85.

³⁹ “Hidden Victims: Women in Post-Communist Poland”, *Helsinki Watch*, 12 March 1992, Volume no. IV, Issue 5, p. 7.



Several authors have pointed to **self-employment** as a solution to general unemployment, above all for women⁴⁰. The following graph shows the percentages of men and women working in the various sectors in Poland.

Although there are still more male entrepreneurs than female entrepreneurs, the percentage of women in this sector is growing fast. In 1989 only 2.7% of entrepreneurs were women; in 1995 the percentage was around 39%. In addition one in every five women working were self-employed or entrepreneurs. The percentage of women entrepreneurs is rising faster than for men.

Yet there are no signs that the government is supporting aid programmes for setting up new businesses or to promote self-employment.

3. Voices from Poland

It is important in particular to underline the greater amount of information, above all recent information, which it has been possible to collate on Poland compared with what was collected

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Information and graphics, Mroczkowski, Tomasz, "Women as employees and entrepreneurs in the Polish transformation", *Industrial Relations Journal*, no. 28, 2, 1997, p. 86.

over the same period and with the same resources in the other two countries selected for the study.

This circumstance may be partly due to the existence in Poland of a Women's Parliamentary Group which has made public the debate on equality and the role of women in society.

However, the public activities of women in Poland struggling to defend their rights and equality are confronted with **two major barriers**: stereotypes and hostility, occasionally open hostility.

Stereotypes and the image of women are regarded by many Polish women working in politics as **the biggest barrier blocking the path to equal opportunities for women**.

Some authors speak of the "social genotype" of Polish women⁴¹: for centuries Polish women were heroines, capable of coping with the most adverse social, political and family situations, the bearers of cultural and religious values, who did it all with the appropriate spirit of self-sacrifice for Fatherland and Family, discreetly and without expecting anything in return, except symbolic recognition. The Communist period simply reinforced this image by forcing women to shoulder the double burden of being workers (for the country) and of being mothers and housewives (for the family).

Women cannot fill bigger quotas in political life until marriage in Poland turns into a real partnership. "Any attempt to guarantee equality for women is pointless while they are not regarded as equal in their own homes"⁴². "The traditional family model in which women look after the home and children is still the dominant model in Poland"⁴³. This stereotyped model, so

⁴¹ Titkow, Anna, "Women in Poland. Political Change: Cause, Modifier or Barrier of Gender Equality", paper for the Seminar *Women in Leadership: Politics and Business*, Vienna, November 1992, Project Liberty, Harvard University, 1992, p. 3.

⁴² Kempka, Dorota, Senator and President of the Women's Parliamentary Group, interview in "Women in Politics: here them roar", *Voice-Society*, 11 May 1997.

⁴³ Kuratowska, Zophia, Senate Spokeswoman, interview in "Women in Politics: hear them roar", *Voice-Society*, 11 May 1997.

deeply-rooted, not only limits women but “assigns specific roles to women and prohibits men from assuming these roles”⁴⁴.

A second barrier is **the more or less open opposition to activities by women to defend their rights** as women or against discrimination. Here are two examples: the resolving of the conflict over abortion within Solidarnosc and the reactions to the work of the Women's Parliamentary Group.

⁴⁴ Krzyzanowska, Olga, Sejm Spokeswoman (Congress), interview in “Women in Politics: hear them roar”, *Voice-Society*, 11 May 1997.

In May 1990, at the Solidarnosc national congress (although half of the members are women, only 10% of the delegates are women), a motion was passed on the need to provide legal protection to the unborn child. The women's section protested because the delegates did not have the power to pass such a motion, since the trade union's female members had not been consulted - in two regions of Poland, the women's section had held referendums in factories, in which the resulting vote was against the resolution and in favour of the right to abortion. The trade union management publicly expressed dissatisfaction with these activities. At the same time, cases of harassment of members of women's sections occurred in regional branches, with women being prohibited from representing the trade union abroad because "they lacked the appropriate moral framework". The head of the women's section resigned and her assistant was dismissed. They were banned from contacts with the other members of the "so-called women's sections" under threat of being publicly discredited⁴⁵.

The members of the Women's Parliamentary Group have to contend daily with being ridiculed in parliament and in the media, where they are branded as "unpatriotic atheists" and "hysterical feminists". The more determined of them are caricatured in vignettes and shows. They also run the more sinister risk of being silenced in their own parties, as was the case of Barbara Labuda, the founder of the Parliamentary Group, suspended for 6 months in 1995 from her party (Union for Freedom) for having offended the sensitivities of other members of the party⁴⁶.

III - The Czech Republic

1. Legislation concerning equality and women's rights

1.1 The Constitution

⁴⁵ Information obtained in an interview with Malgorzata Tarasiewicz, responsible for the Women's Section of Solidarnosc 1989-1991, in "Hidden Victims. Women in Post-Communist Poland", *Helsinki Watch*, Volume no. IV, Issue 5, 12 March 1992, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Karpinski, Eva, "Do Polish Women Need Feminism? Recent Activity of the Parliamentary Women's Group", *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, no. 16, 1, 1996, p. 94.

The text of the Czech Constitution of 16 December 1992 does not contain a list of fundamental rights. Fundamental rights and freedoms are contained in a Charter which, as stated in Article 3 of the Constitution, forms part of the constitutional system of the Czech Republic.

This **Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms** is of an essentially liberal nature. Unlike the constitutions of the other two countries selected for this study, the Czech Charter of Fundamental Rights **does not contain any specific measure on equality between men and women.**

Article 1 states that all persons are free and equal in terms of dignity and rights. The general equality clause is contained in Art. 3 which guarantees human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinguishing between the sexes, among other things.

As in the Hungarian and Polish cases, the Czech Constitution also contains two articles setting down special employment protection measures for women, Art. 32.2, like many other systems, contains a guarantee of special care and protection for pregnant women at work. In Art. 29.1, however, protection is granted to women as such, regardless of their reproductive role. This article entitles women to greater protection and special working conditions, together with other vulnerable groups such as teenagers and the disabled.

1.2 Other legislation

There are no specific measures containing the guarantee of **equal pay** for work of equal value. This principle is contained in international instruments ratified by the Czech Republic (ILO Convention, 1958), thus the effective implementation of these instruments leaves a lot to be desired. There is an average wage difference of 30% in the Czech Republic (the difference in pay between men and women is minimal for unskilled workers and rises for jobs requiring technical skills).

There are also certain decrees aimed at **specifically protecting women at work.** For instance, the extensive employment protection measures for women set down in the Employment Code and the provisions on certain economic sectors.

The special measures in the area of work generally turn into sources of discrimination against women during economically unsettled periods. This is the case with the restrictions and/or prohibitions concerning the protection of health and hygiene which are frequently turned into good reasons for dismissing a woman or transferring her to another job, generally less-well paid.

The provision in the Employment Code on the prohibition of night work for women also needs to be revised.

Various authors are calling for less restrictive regulations specifically aimed at women workers and a greater margin of manoeuvre for negotiations between employers and employees in the context of **collective agreements**⁴⁷.

The **social dialogue** is recognised by both the Employment Code and a Law on Collective Bargaining. The Employment Code obliges the authorities to consult trade unions in matters relating to the living and working conditions of workers. Hence the importance of the involvement of women in trade unions.

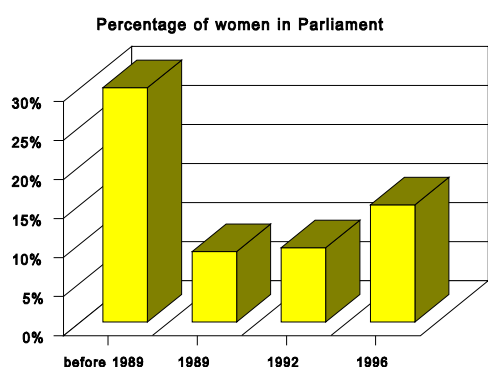
2. Figures on political involvement and the employment situation of women in the Czech Republic

2.1 Women and political involvement

⁴⁷ Report by the Empirical Research Centre (STEM), Prague, "Position of women in the countries of Central Europe (Czech Republic and Slovakian Republic)", produced in preparation for the Conference on Equality and Democracy, Council of Europe, Steering Committee on Equality between Men and Women (CDRG), Strasbourg, February 1995.

The graph⁴⁸ below shows the trend in the representation of women in the National Czech Council (Parliament) between the transition period and the 1996 elections.

In it we can see the drastic reduction which occurred with the abolition of the quota system applied prior to 1989, with representation falling from 30% to 9%. In the second elections, in 1992, women accounted for 9.5% of all seats. However after the 1996 elections we can see a major increase in **the number of women to 15%**. This increase can be explained by the



importance of women's affairs during the 1996 electoral campaign. The social democratic party (CSSD) in particular promised to set up a ministry especially for women and the family.

According to several authors, the weakness of women emerges when we analyse the evolution and functioning of **women's organisations**. In the period

1990-93, some 50 organisations were established (associations, movements, clubs, etc.) in the Czech Republic. These associations, movements and clubs share certain features: a low or insignificant number of members, dependence on a political party, and marginal importance and influence. Most have disappeared or simply operate on the basis of members-sympathisers, with a few exceptions.

One exception is the Czech Women's Union (former Communist women's organisation) which has a large number of members, most of whom continue out of habit or custom. In 1993 the Union merged with the Czech National Democratic Party.

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Adapted from "Central and Eastern European Women: A Portrait", European Parliament, W-8, *Women's Rights Series* and "Men and Women in Politics. Democracy still in the making. A World Comparative Study", *Reports and Documents Series*, no. 28, Interparliamentary Union, Geneva, 1997.

Another exception is the Women's Movement for Equality, founded in 1990. It has a small number of members. It put forward candidates for the 1992 elections in cooperation with the Liberal Social Union (a party with 8% of the members of parliament).

There are two other non-political women's organisations. The Association of Women Entrepreneurs, which attempts to support job creation activities for women, and the association "Mothers of Prague" which is active in the area of ecology. However neither one of these organisations, which may be regarded as being very successful, has any direct influence on political power.

2.2 Women on the labour market

The Czech Republic has had and still has one of the highest **rates of female employment**. Although the unemployment rate is relatively low (3.2% in 1993), women account for 58% of the unemployed.

It is clear that, under the new conditions, the fact of being a woman is decisive for entrepreneurs when it comes to recruiting, or rather not recruiting; and that the number of women unemployed and the number who "opt" to withdraw from the labour market will increase when the family financial situation permits this. There is one demographic characteristic specific to the Czech Republic which places women in a particularly difficult situation as regards a professional career: the high number of young couples (18 - 19 years of age) forced into marriage because the woman is pregnant⁴⁹. In this case the lack of work experience and of specialised training is compounded by the family responsibilities borne by women right from the start of their working lives.

3. Voices from the Czech Republic

⁴⁹ Report by the Empirical Research Centre (STEM), Prague, "Place des femmes dans les pays d'Europe central (République tchèque et République slovaque)" produced in preparation for the Conference on Equality and Democracy, Council of Europe, Steering Committee on Equality between Men and Women (CDRG), Strasbourg, February 1995.

Of the information collated for this report, the Czech Republic had the biggest number of articles and declarations questioning feminism and political action to promote equality between men and women. Perhaps the most illustrative is the statement by the wife of the Czech Prime Minister, an economist at the Czech Academy of Sciences: “**We have been pressurised from abroad to set up artificial feminist groups ...** but in terms of equality we have achieved much higher standards here than some women abroad ... the struggle for women’s rights in the Czech Republic is irrelevant”⁵⁰.

But if we analyse more thoroughly the reasons presented by this and other articles against feminism or the emancipation of women, we can see clearly two types of beliefs (and perhaps of women). On the one hand, the re-emergence of traditional values, the family and the home as elements of female biology⁵¹. This group is obviously opposed to feminist theories of emancipation and/or parity. But there is another group, who also consider themselves to be opposed to feminism, yet who are in fact opposed to “the simple division of people into “oppressed women” and “male oppressors”, and who attempt instead to underline the common humanity of all⁵². This phenomenon of humanity, of the need to recover or redefine communication and relationship preconceptions, is a marked feature of the working papers of many women’s groups in the Czech Republic.

⁵⁰ Mroczkowski, Tomasz, “Women as employees and entrepreneurs in the Polish transformation”, *Industrial Relations Journal*, no. 28, 2, 1997, p. 84.

⁵¹ Hauser, Eva, “How and why do Czech women organise? (Altos, Sopranos and a few Discordant Voices)”, *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, no. 16, 1, 1997, p. 88-89.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 89.

CONCLUSIONS

We will briefly reiterate the most interesting ideas in the preceding pages regarding the consideration of possible political action by the European Parliament or by the Women's Rights Committee itself.

1) The gender perspective

The transition which Central and Eastern Europe is currently going through has been regarded by most people as being neutral with regard to the sex of those experiencing it. On the one hand, this may be due to the fact that in these countries the law states specifically that there is equality between men and women, there are similar percentages for men and women on the labour market, and they have the same access to education and social services. Thus it was thought that the reform affected all men and women equally, and that the recession would make things difficult for all.

We know that in reality this is not so. **Transition is affecting men and women differently.** This statement serves as (yet another) call in favour of the inclusion of the gender perspective in political action. And, as a precondition to ensure that this is possible, we must stress the need **to find out about the situation of women.** To this end specific studies and data broken down in terms of sex are needed.

2) The "shock therapy" strategy and social policies

An important element in the impact of transition on the situation of women is the strategy chosen for transition. The so-called "shock therapy" strategy involves widescale disruption of social life. The strategy neglects very complex social issues, thus giving rise to a crisis in every sector. In addition to this there is the pressure to fulfil the economic and financial criteria required for **accession to the European Union.**

These countries must survive great change. A fundamental element in the process of change must be **social dialogue.** A basic criterion in all the discussions on social rights must be the consultation of those who will be affected immediately.

3) Going beyond equality: parity

It has been pointed out several times that, in reaction to the compulsory egalitarianism of the communist regimes, women are rejecting feminism and the struggle for women's rights as such. In many cases, a slight, subtle difference emerges: some women in Central Europe reject this form of egalitarianism, whether compulsory or not, which **brings women onto the same level as men**, with a new burden of rights and responsibilities, and yet leaves intact the social and personal situation of men. This form of equality, which we have also experienced or are experiencing in our countries, considers the new status of women as a **"privilege"**. Many women in Central Europe reject this idea (and hence much of western feminism) and are seeking "perfect equality", or parity.

4) Political activity

The political activity of women in Central Europe has **diminished in terms of numbers** (at the moment it stands in the middle of the arch describing European Union countries). Despite this important fact, there are other facts to be acknowledged: women dedicated to politics, particularly in Poland but above all in Hungary, are now playing a **very active and important role** although they often find themselves in a hostile environment.

The reasons given in surveys to explain the low number of women involved in political life are familiar to many countries of Western Europe.

The **quota systems** to ensure the participation of women are very reminiscent of previous regimes and result in a quite high level of rejection.

5) Employment

These women are used to very high levels of participation in the labour market. According to some surveys, many would return to the home to look after their children, abandoning the labour market, but the effects of **long-term unemployment or exclusion from the labour market** on self-esteem and the lives of these women are not known.

There is considerable demand for **part-time work**. However caution must be exercised as, while part-time work is regarded as an important instrument in reconciling family and professional responsibilities, experience in Western European countries shows us that it is also a major area of discrimination against women in terms of labour rights and the amount of social security benefits. Despite the fact that statistics show that women in Central Europe have been isolated from technological processes and vocational training, the rate of growth of **small and medium-sized**

enterprises headed by women reveals considerable potential and reserves. Cooperation and international exchanges of experience have proven to be important instruments for aid and development.

6) The image of women

Despite the images of Communist propaganda showing women driving tractors or working on the foundations of a building site, the traditional image of women has survived, above all due to the persistence of a division in the public sphere/private sphere equation which grants to women the exclusive role of carers. This division has been reinforced by the Communist system. With transition, there has been no emphasis on the need to share family and home responsibilities also; instead **the traditional pre-Communist model has re-emerged** involving a strict separation between the public sphere (the natural domain of men) and the private sphere (natural domain of women).

We know, also from experience, how difficult it is to overcome the resistance of these cultural models; nevertheless despite the fact that it is a slow process (like all cultural changes), there should be continued emphasis on **the importance of education**.

7) The European Union: a dilemma

Can we deduce from these facts and figures that women in these countries are in a worse situation than those in the European Union? Certainly. The women in Central Europe are going through a serious social and economic crisis and the fundamental restructuring of their societies which is affecting, in some cases adversely, every aspect of their lives.

Can we therefore conclude that these women are **more discriminated against or oppressed** (compared with men in Central Europe) than their female neighbours in Western Europe (compared with men in Western Europe)?

This conclusion cannot be clearly drawn from the opinions and figures collated. And perhaps it is worth pointing out that a comparison in terms of "more" and "less" is not very fruitful.

First of all, because women find themselves in many and diverse situations in the European Union depending on country, social and economic class, level of education, etc. Second, because **the European Union also has forms of gender imbalance** even in countries in which the situation of women is regarded as more advanced (we are thinking, for example, of the segregation of the labour market in Finland and the small number of women in managerial positions in private companies in Sweden and the Netherlands).

What the figures in this study do reflect is the **vulnerable social situation** of women, or rather, of many groups of women (the unemployed, retired, single and divorced mothers, unskilled workers) in the countries selected. A situation which could be aggravated by the shift towards a free market economy and by pressure from the European Union if, as it appears, the gender perspective continues to be relegated to a secondary position and women do not organise.

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