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Toronto Symposium on Human Cultural Security; June, 2005
Confronting Gender Issues in Eastern Europe

Data gaps in gender issues

15 years after the collapse of socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, the impact, if any, that this transformation has had on gender relationships remains largely unexplored. There is a pressing need to fill this research void, given that gender is a factor in many weighty socio-political issues affecting the "European house" and its future as a civil society. An international comparative discourse is an obvious requirement here, but is not yet underway (Jähnert/Gohrisch/Hahn/Nickel/Peinl/Schäfgen 2001; Domsch/Ladwig/Tenten 2003).

On the one hand, "looking at the situation at the beginning of the discussion about gender equality in the early nineties and the situation of women and men in the CEEC, tremendous progress has by now been made in the level of awareness of the issue" (Lange 2003: 53). On the other hand the process of developing a distinct European identity is marked by a continuing "conceptual disregard of gender" (Kreisky/Sauer 1997: 20). There is, however, a gender subtext, revealed, for example, in the way language is used. One instance: the social integration of the E.U. is illustrated as “dualism of far-reaching internal brotherliness and simultaneous external un-brotherliness”, followed by the recommendation “to be a little less brotherly (or fraternal) to the ‘inside’ and a little more brotherly (or fraternal) to the ‘outside’.” (Münch 2004: 289). The available data also show a “conceptual disregard of gender” while at the same time the gender connotation is, in reality, part of the processes leading towards a developing a European identity. “There is, however a widely shared perception that social security, especially maternity, child care, and family benefits, exerts a significant influence on gender relations in the world of work and at home. Moreover, this influence has subtle dimensions that are not always apparent in national statistics.” (Steinhilber 2003: 315) Steinhilber clarifies: “gaps in existing data prevent the drawing of firm conclusions about a number of gender-related issues (pp. 315).

The report on equality between women and men of 2004 reveals the core of European equality policies: “the need to fully utilise the productive potential of the European labour

force is key to achieving the overall Lisbon strategy goals of becoming, by 2010, ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’. The promotion of women's participation in the labour market, and efforts aiming at the elimination of gender gaps in all spheres of life, are crucial for success.” (Report 2004, 3).

Discussion of these transformation processes has been extremely ambivalent in women's and gender research (Gohrisch et al. 2001; Cholij/Neusuess 2004). After all, these processes display at least two crucial, contradictory factors. On the one hand, they are always founded on a national, historical context and the concomitant "national gender order", into which the structures of state socialism were also embedded (Riolli-Saltzmann/Savicki 2003). By comparison with western countries, gender relations in the former socialist countries produced, in some respects, an ambivalent “head start on equality” (Geissler 1996), notably in terms of female employment. In most socialist countries, social policies encouraged the reconciliation of paid employment with motherhood.

On the other hand, transformation today is linked to a western “path dependency”; in other words, there is pressure to adapt to patterns of the market economy which itself is undergoing drastic alteration. As production, labour and labour markets in “post-industrial” countries are buffeted by change, the prototype of the male breadwinner and the female homemaker has been falling apart, along with the polarised domains of “public” and “private” ascribed to men and women. It is not clear what this means when it comes to structuring the “public” and the “private” spheres in post-socialist countries. Perhaps the old concepts do not apply any more, and the viability of (western) feminist theories is already being challenged. Discussions showed that this position did not attract equal support from West European and East European feminists. According to Maria Adamik (2001), one cognitive explanation offered for this is that even in the West European countries, the social transformation taking place is reflected in many different forms. Furthermore, interpretations of the current erosion of conventional gender relations which have recourse to the traditional categories of “public” and “private”, and to an a priori assumption of an existing gender hierarchy which disfavours women, are evidently skirting around social realities, which are fanning out more broadly, as Anna Gheaus (2001) made clear: if the agenda is social equality between the two gender groups, the aim is surely to advise an equitable division of labour within both domains of human activity.

This is also singled out as a key condition for democratisation in the post-socialist countries, still obstructed by the gender hierarchy which governs the relationship between the public and the private.

Riolli-Saltzmann/Savicki discuss the connections with reference to Hofstede (1998). “Eastern Europe was significantly more feminine than Western Europe. Masculine cultures emphasise characteristics that have sometimes been associated with the male gender: autonomy, assertiveness, work, and the importance of possessions. In contrast, feminine cultures actively emphasise social consciousness, nurturance, the centrality of social connectedness, and the importance of people” (Hofstede 1998). As these dimensions not only start from a duality of gender but, moreover, reconstruct these, Riolli-Saltzmann replaces the concept of Feminine with Quality of Life-oriented cultures and the concept of Masculine with Career/Success-oriented cultures. “In theory, more Feminine, Quality of Life cultures ‘would offer both sexes, especially women, greater opportunities for the fulfilment of multiple social roles (employment, marriage, parenthood)’. General values of Feminine, Quality of Life cultures include less occupational segregation by gender, equal expectation for being the primary economic provider, equality of education in all fields” (Riolli-Saltzmann/Savicki 64), and so on. Even though the position they take still needs to be discussed and its empirical value still needs to be assessed, they do make explicit that gender policies cannot be reduced to the equal integration of women and men into the labour market.

Gender Equality

The E.U. plays a major role in guaranteeing gender equality in their member states. In the context of the E.U. accession process and meeting various directives, candidate countries are called upon to adjust national legal and institutional frameworks so as to accelerate their transition to a market economy, but also to strengthen human rights standards, and democratic, civic and political policies and practices. “Gender equality came relatively late onto the agenda of negotiations for entry to the E.U. Much greater priority was placed on social and economic reforms based on neo-liberal principles that were lacking a gender perspective. Women in accession countries have increasingly raised concerns about the disproportionate negative consequences for women in social security and pension systems, as well as other areas of exclusion or discrimination. They have pointed to the prevailing

weakness of mechanisms which are needed to ensure effective implementation of E.U.-gender-equality directives." (Cholij/Neususess 2004)

Liberalisation of the economy, combined with drastic social reforms, have translated into increasing gaps between the impoverished and the newly rich as well as between women and men. Unemployment rates have escalated in many CEE countries. While both women and men have been adversely affected by high unemployment rates, women experience discrimination in access and re-entry to the labour market, especially in high paying sectors, in spite of their sometimes-higher levels of education, as compared to men (Cholij/Neususess).

The composition of employment varies widely across economies. But in general in all the countries covered (table 1), the proportion of people employed in agriculture is higher in the new member states than in the old E.U., however, this pattern is reversed in the service industries. But there is some way to go in the convergence of employment structures in the E.U. Employment in agriculture and industry has declined since the start of transition and in the same period of time employment in the service industries has increased. (Domsch/Ladwig/Tenten 2003:20).

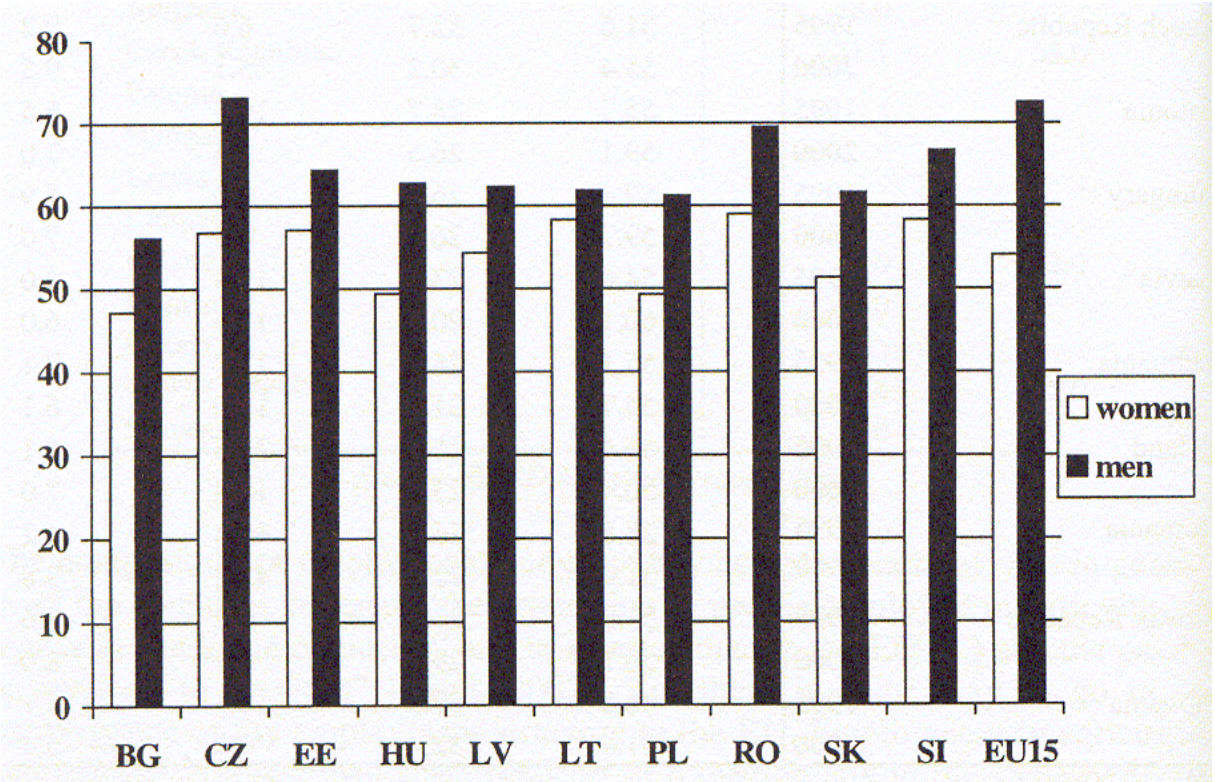
Table 1

Country/Indicator		*Services*	*Industry*	*Agriculture*	*Construction*
Bulgaria	1995	42.9	27.3	24.4	5.4
	2000	P44.3	P25.1	P26.6	P4.0
Czech Republic	1995	51.6	32.7	6.6	9.2
	2000	55.4	30.2	5.1	9.3
Estonia	1995	55.3	28.7	10.5	5.5
	2000	59.1	26.5	7.4	7.0
Hungary	1995	59.4	26.7	8.0	5.9
	2000	59.7	26.8	6.5	7.0
Latvia	1995	54.6	23.1	17.4	5.0
	2000	60.1	20.3	13.5	6.0
Lithuania	1995	55.1	26.1	11.7	7.1
	2000	54.7	21.2	18.0	6.1
Poland	1995	45.4	25.9	22.6	6.1
	2000	50.4	23.8	18.8	7.0
Romania	1995	28.8	26.8	40.3	4.2
	2000	P31.0	P22.4	P42.8	P3.8
Slovak Republic	1995	51.9	30.3	9.2	8.6
	2000	56.1	29.3	6.7	8.0
Slovenia	1995	46.5	37.9	10.4	5.1
	2000	51.4	32.4	9.9	5.4

Source: Domsch/Ladwig/Tenten 2003:20

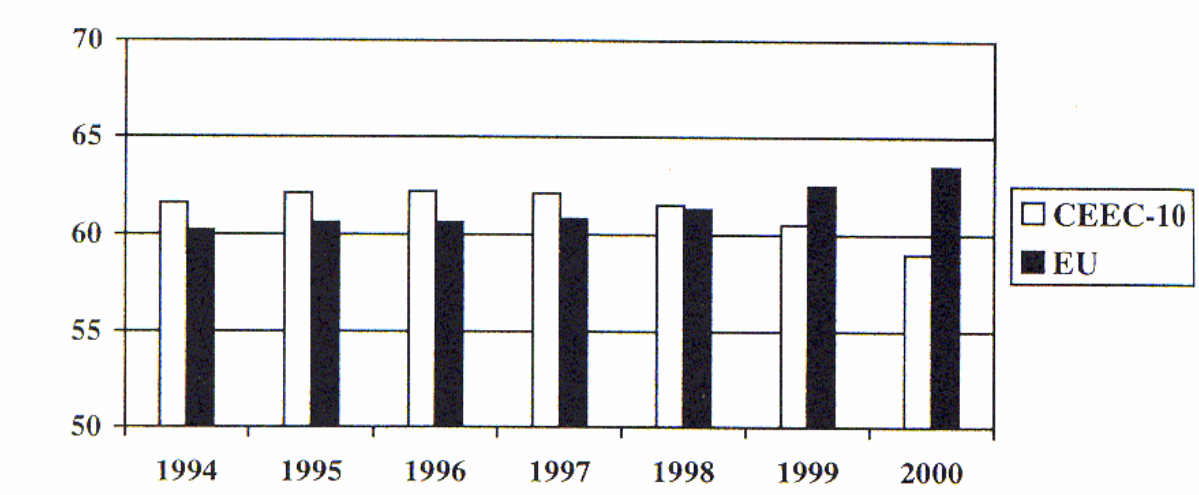
The informal economy grew as a consequence of transition. Many people hold multiple jobs, combining formal, declared, work with informal, undeclared, work. Participation rates in the labour market are still above the European average of about 70 per cent.

Figure 1



Source: Domsch/Ladwig/Tenten 2003: 22)

Figure 2



Source: Lange 2003: 46

Gender Segregation in employment

Under communism the situation of women appeared very different from their situation in the West. Female participation in the labour market was high, but the sexual division of labour and the gender wage gap and occupational segregation, even though not so important as in Western Europe, persisted in the labour force with women concentrated in certain occupations and industries and in the lower-skilled and lower-paid services. Women were also often passed over for promotion and important positions because their childcare responsibilities prevented them from being 'reliable' workers. Women were expected to work full-time, like their male comrades, and then come home and perform most of the domestic chores. (Domsch/Ladwig/Tenten 2003: 24)

Now the fall of communism has brought about a rise in gender (bourgeoise) traditionalism. Rather than building on the existing infrastructure of female involvement in the labour force, the post-communist countries are reinforcing and recreating the patriarchal system of discrimination against women in the work place (Domsch/Ladwig/Tenten 2003: 24).
A qualitative survey in Poland, Hungary and in the Czech Republic found that "Gender equality was widely accepted by the respondents as an appropriate goal for social security law and practice. There was less agreement, however, about its practical meaning in this context. The survey reflected three distinct perspectives. For a large number of respondents it means formal equal treatment of women and men by social security schemes. … For others, gender

equality can, or for some it must, include differential treatment of women and men. … A smaller group held that social security should be structured to support women who pursue goals traditionally associated with women's social roles. They assert that women should seek to fulfill themselves first in their homes, and then at work. … Instead, as some respondents pointed out, under conditions of a tight labour market many consider it more important to maintain or create jobs for men so that they can provide for their families. It appears that despite the continuous, strong attachment of women to the workforce in all three countries, a significant group of the population continues to regard women's income as supplementary; and their views have been reinforced by difficult economic conditions" (Steinhilber 2003: 317/318).

In some countries women are, either directly or indirectly, encouraged to revert to the role of housewives and full-time carers, in order to revert to a position of more jobs being available for the male population and at the same time to solve the increasing problem of insufficient childcare facilities. (Domsch/Ladwig/Tenten 2003: 25). But in any case "gender segregation, whether horizontal … or vertical … (still) is not as common as in E.U. member states".
Furthermore, the proportion of women employed in managerial occupations is higher in the new member states. The difference in average earnings between men and women, however, in the new, formerly communist, member states seems to be similar to that in the other E.U. member states. In most countries, women's earnings, as a percentage of those of men, averaged between 75 per cent of those of men (in Estonia and Lithuania) and just over 80 per cent (Hungary, Poland and Romania), the level being higher in Slovenia (almost 90 per cent).

Scholars such as Lange, for example, have argued "Women's relatively better position during the time of economic restructuring can be attributed mainly to four reasons:
The high loss of jobs in traditional industries where more men worked;
Women are concentrated in the service sector which has not been as strongly affected by the transition as the industrial sector;
The services sector still offers – even in times of economic change – an employment potential, for example in the new field of information and communication technologies or in the banking sector,
Women are highly represented in public services (health, education, administration), sectors which were only gradually slimmed down." (Lange 2003: 47)

What do societies in transformation have to do with the cultural debate on gender and human security?

Feminist gender research has revealed how tenacious and flexible the male/female dualism is. This begs a question of some poignancy to feminism: will social transformation at the beginning of this millennium merely lead to yet another "modernisation" of the old (bourgeois) bipolarity, with asymmetries and hierarchies implicit in the social order evolving on a higher plane, or will we witness a more fundamental erosion of the gender dualism in society due to a radical structural transformation of the economy, work, and life in general? There has been a good deal of empirical evidence – especially in transformation research – to show that the forms of the dualist order are tending to lose force as a result of "overlaps and transgressions", not merely an adjustment of female biographies to match those of men, but also in the reverse direction a "structurally induced feminisation" of male (employment) biographies. Alongside the deep-seated system of symbols articulating gender dualism, another pattern appears to be expressing itself in the gender relations of the modern (western) world, an "equality model" derived from notions of civil society. (Bilden 1991) Two patterns – difference and equality – seem to be colliding in all walks of life and to be acquiring new contours from their highly ambivalent reciprocal references.

How open is women's and gender research itself to re-thinking the gender relationship? Are there approaches which facilitate new options for feminist debate and which are able to challenge the "near-natural" law of gender difference and hierarchy on a coherent basis? Or are we restricted to updating "what we have already learned about the differences and the different interests of women as 'one half of humanity'" (U. Gerhard 1996)?

Feminism and women's research – which have their roots in Western Europe rather than in Eastern Europe – have always been at pains to show that gender relations are an independent factor in addition to class relations and all other relations, and that gender inequality is distinct from class inequality. Class and gender are two separate social structures which are not necessarily subject to systematic links. This explained, on the one hand, how it was possible for patriarchal structures to come under increasing fire in the post-war period on the basis of capitalist social structures, leading to a plurality of lifestyles, and on the other hand – in a context of state welfare and prosperity – why the new women's movement in Western Europe

(Germany) was less interested in equality issues around the distribution of wealth and property, mobilising instead around lifestyle choices and self-determination (Gerhard 1995).

But history has moved on and now the problems have crystallised in the new member states of the E.U. The socio-political agenda today is dominated by competition for scant resources. Questions of social inequality are attracting more attention. This is increasingly reflected in feminist research (Stolz-Willig/Veil (1999); Gottschall (1998); Steinhilber (2003)).

In general, however, it is fair to claim that transformation research to date suffers from a gap in its fabric: the gender gap. Although gender relationships have played no part in transformation research, it has not prevented East European women from being presented in blanket terms: on the one hand as "victims" of western modernisation and on the other hand as the "root cause of the labour market crisis" in the new member states (and even elsewhere). The "trouble" with transformation research can be summarised in Birgit Sauer's terms (1996) as follows:

While men in the field work on their theories of transformation, usually seeking explanatory support from the theory of modernisation (refined by the sociology of culture and/or the theory of institutions), women in the field are only too abstinent in their use of theory. In the maelstrom of theoretical transformation research women are largely absent, as subject matter and as scientists, and gender barely exists as a category for investigation. "Transformation research makes women invisible as authors of transition.... A toolkit of categories which would cast light on the gendering of social and political processes and the stratificatory effects linked to gender will be sought in vain." (Sauer 1996).

In women's and gender research, by contrast, societal transformation is not granted theoretical consideration, and the empirical research in this context is relatively meagre or confined to small-scale descriptions, where "big" questions are there for the asking: What happens to the gender relationship when societal structures change radically? Is it possible, under such conditions, to uphold the hypothesis of a gender dualism which, while able to modernise, remains unshakeable as an asymmetrical system?

Societal transformation processes cut across gender at right angles, leading to “hybrid formations” in all lifestyles in the sense “that habits and customs drift loose from existing practices, combining with new habits to yield new practices” (Pieterse 1998).

Transformation, in this light, can be described as pluralising the organisational forms of gender relations, which may exist side by side as traditional forms (in east and/or west) but also as new hybrids or as temporary combinations of “eastern” and “western” practices in widely varying gender arrangements. As individuals move within this plurality as social subjects, they develop an ability to fall back on diverse organisational forms, using them, appropriating them (perhaps without enthusiasm), and reshaping them as active players in transformation (“performance of gender relationships”). Of course, in the “dual east-west transformation process” (Nickel 1995) we should not overlook one “asymmetry” which favours western dominance and thereby the western gender order. Although social relations and organisational forms are in a state of flux in the west (erosion of (male) standard employment patterns and the breadwinner’s family, persistent commitment to employment by women, etc.), encouraging home-bred “hybrids” in the process, there is a difference to Eastern Europe in that the springboard for transformation was not the demise or decline of a social system. Rather, transformation is occurring within capital structures and institutions which are reckoned to be stable (Nickel 1999).

From this point of view the transformation processes in Eastern and Central Europe are an empirical field for research on the impact of culture on human security which, even if they lie at our back door, have by no means been properly harvested.

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