

Fodor, Éva

Working Paper

Women at work: The status of women in the labour markets of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

3

Women at Work

The Status of Women in the
Labour Markets of the Czech
Republic, Hungary and Poland

by Éva Fodor





Occasional Paper 3

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of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland

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February 2005

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acronyms

GDI	Gender Development Index
GDP	gross domestic produce
PPP	purchasing power parity

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SUMMARY

This paper assesses trends in women's labour-market positions in three Central European countries from 1989 to 2002: Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. I also examine how these changes are related to—affect, are derived from and have consequences for—the reformulation of women's social rights, especially those concerning women's responsibilities in childbirth and childrearing.

I argue that, in absolute terms, women's labour market position deteriorated in the three countries in this study, but not to the extent that had been expected. In fact, women improved their positions in some areas, and their losses *relative to men* have—so far—been minimal.

More importantly, there are significant variations across the three countries in how women fared. In Poland, a “familial welfare state” (in which families, rather than the state have been expected to take primary responsibility for dependents), combined with a long history of women's labour-market disadvantage, assigns women primarily to the household. Women do work, of course, but unemployment is rampant, the wage gap is significant, and women seem to have difficulty gaining positions of authority in the workplace.

Women are most likely to be economically active in the Czech Republic, which underwent a slower, less radical, economic transformation process, but they are found in significantly lower-level positions in the labour market: women keep working, but at a distinct disadvantage compared to men.

Hungary, on the other hand, is marked by a strong bifurcation of women's positions. This differentiation exists in the other two countries as well, but the presence of a poor ethnic minority in Hungary makes social exclusion along the lines of gender (as well as race and class) more visible and also politically significant. Hungarian women in the upper-middle class—often also young, childless and highly educated—have been quite successful in gaining or retaining their positions in the labour market and fighting for social rights that help them combine these with some household responsibilities. Poor women, however, are left behind, inactive, retired early or subsisting on welfare benefits; they are discouraged from looking for work, and would have trouble fitting into the new world order.

Éva Fodor is Assistant Professor at the Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude porte sur l'évolution de la situation des femmes sur le marché du travail dans trois pays d'Europe centrale, la Hongrie, la République tchèque et la Pologne, de 1989 à 2002. J'examine aussi les rapports entre ces changements et la reformulation des droits sociaux des femmes, en particulier de celles qui ont des enfants et les élèvent, c'est-à-dire la façon dont les changements affectent cette reformulation, en découlent et ont des conséquences sur elle.

Je prétends qu'en termes absolus, la situation des femmes sur le marché du travail s'est dégradée dans les trois pays étudiés, mais pas autant que prévu. En fait, les femmes ont amélioré leur situation dans certains domaines et leurs pertes *par rapport aux hommes* ont été, jusqu'à présent, minimales.

Plus important, les trois pays présentent des variations sensibles pour ce qui est de la situation des femmes. En Pologne, où elles sont traditionnellement défavorisées sur le marché du travail, elles sont assignées principalement au foyer par un "Etat providence familial" (dans lequel ce sont les familles, plutôt que l'Etat, qui sont censées assumer en premier lieu la responsabilité des personnes à charge). Des femmes travaillent, bien sûr, mais le chômage est endémique, l'écart salarial considérable et elles semblent avoir de la peine à accéder à des postes de pouvoir sur leur lieu de travail.

C'est en République tchèque que les femmes ont le plus de chances d'être actives. Mais dans ce pays où la transformation économique a été plus lente, moins radicale, elles occupent des postes nettement inférieurs à ceux des hommes; elles continuent de travailler mais sont sensiblement défavorisées par rapport à eux.

La Hongrie, en revanche, se distingue par une forte bifurcation des trajectoires professionnelles des femmes. Cette différenciation existe aussi dans les deux autres pays mais la présence d'une minorité ethnique pauvre en Hongrie rend l'exclusion sociale en fonction du sexe (comme de la race et de la classe) à la fois plus visible et aussi plus significative du point de vue politique. Les femmes hongroises de la classe moyenne supérieure—souvent aussi jeunes, sans enfants et dotées d'une solide éducation—ont parfaitement réussi à se faire une situation sur le marché du travail ou à la garder et à lutter pour les droits sociaux qui les aident à concilier leur travail avec certaines responsabilités ménagères. Les femmes pauvres, en revanche, sont dépassées, sans emploi, mises en retraite anticipée ou vivent de l'aide sociale; elles sont découragées de rechercher un emploi et elles auraient de la peine à s'adapter au nouvel ordre mondial.

Éva Fodor est professeur auxiliaire au Département des études de genre à l'Université d'Europe centrale, Budapest, Hongrie.

RESUMEN

En este documento se evalúan las tendencias en las posiciones que ocuparon las mujeres en el mercado de trabajo en tres países de Europa central, entre 1989 y 2002: Hungría, la República Checa y Polonia. También se examina el modo en que estos cambios están relacionados con la reformulación de los derechos sociales de las mujeres (en la medida en que se derivan, afectan y tienen consecuencias en su reformulación), especialmente los relativos a las responsabilidades de las mujeres en lo que respecta a la maternidad y el cuidado de los hijos.

Se sostiene que, en términos absolutos, la posición de las mujeres en el mercado de trabajo se deterioró en los tres países que abarca el presente estudio, aunque no tanto como se había previsto. De hecho, las mujeres mejoraron su situación en algunos ámbitos, y las pérdidas *en relación con los hombres*—hasta ahora—han sido mínimas.

Lo más importante es que, en los tres países se observan variaciones significativas en cuanto al progreso logrado por las mujeres. En Polonia, un “estado de bienestar familiar” (donde, más que el Estado, son las familias las que se hacen cargo de los dependientes), combinado con una situación histórica de desventaja de las mujeres en el mercado de trabajo, asigna fundamentalmente a estas últimas la responsabilidad del hogar. Las mujeres trabajan, por supuesto, pero el desempleo es galopante, la brecha salarial es considerable, y las mujeres parecen tener dificultades para conseguir puestos de autoridad en el lugar de trabajo.

En la República Checa, donde el proceso de transformación económica fue más lento y menos radical, las mujeres suelen ser económicamente activas, pero ocupan cargos de nivel muy inferior en el mercado de trabajo; es decir, siguen trabajando, pero están en una clara situación de desventaja en comparación con los hombres.

Por otra parte, Hungría se caracteriza por una notable bifurcación de las posiciones que ocupan las mujeres. Esta diferenciación también se observa en los otros dos países, pero la presencia de una minoría étnica pobre en Hungría da lugar a que la exclusión social, basada en la distinción por género (así como la discriminación por motivos de raza y clase social), sea más notoria y también más importante desde el punto de vista político. Las mujeres húngaras de clase media-alta—que en muchos casos también son jóvenes, sin hijos y tienen estudios superiores—han logrado en gran medida conseguir o mantener sus posiciones en el mercado de trabajo, y luchar por obtener unos derechos sociales que les ayuden a armonizar sus responsabilidades laborales y familiares. Sin embargo, las mujeres pobres, lejos de conseguir estos objetivos, son dejadas a la zaga, “inactivadas” o jubiladas tempranamente para subsistir de las prestaciones sociales; no se les alienta para la búsqueda de trabajo y tendrían dificultades para adaptarse al nuevo orden mundial.

Éva Fodor es Profesora Asistente en el Departamento de Estudios de Género (*Department of Gender Studies*) de la *Central European University*, en Budapest, Hungría.



I.

introduction

This paper explores the ways in which gender inequality is being reshaped in paid and unpaid work in three countries—Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland—which underwent a major overhaul of their political and economic systems a little over a decade ago.

The countries in this study are three of the most “successful” post-state-socialist economies, at least according to the definitions of international organizations and the tools of international statistics. These are the countries that have exhibited the highest level of economic prosperity (Slovenia is the only one that outperformed them), the fastest and most organized movement toward liberal democracy, and the smoothest transition toward the European Union. Nevertheless, or perhaps even because of their fast integration into the global market and politics, scholars have expressed concern about the “male democracies” (Eisenstein 1993:303) taking shape in the region.

In this paper I try to move beyond the “did women become the losers of the social transformations” type of question posed by various researchers in the early 1990s (Funk and Mueller 1993; Einhorn 1993). Instead I assess women’s labour-market position in order to understand how these societies redefine and re-establish women’s position in the new political order, and how women see themselves as productive and/or reproductive citizens of the new states. I argue that, while women’s overall position in the labour market did decline in these countries, this was on a far smaller scale than predicted. In some fields the position of women actually improved, and in general their losses have so far been only marginally greater than those of male workers.

More important, however, is that different patterns of gender inequality can be observed in the three societies. At one end of the scale, women in Poland have, for various reasons discussed later, tended to be less well placed in the labour market than in the other countries, and this continues to be the case.¹ The Czech Republic, after a slower and less radical economic transformation than Poland’s, stands at the other end of the continuum, but here too women hold significantly lower-level positions in the labour market than men and continue to be significantly disadvantaged. Hungary displays the greatest internal class differentiation of the three; although middle-class women have to a considerable degree held their own in labour markets and in terms of social rights, the poor (particularly those from the large ethnic minority groups) have lost ground and face increasing problems and social exclusion.

In the rest of this paper I describe these three somewhat different paths in more detail. Of course the similarities are also striking in many cases, as well as the convergence toward European patterns (which in fact these countries had never greatly diverged from). Yet the differences, slight as they may be in some cases, are also worth pointing out, if for no other reason than that they are so often ignored, yet could lead to sharper differentiations in the longer run.

1 Ironically, of the three countries it is in Poland that women have the highest overall representation in Parliament (Montgomery 2003) and where women’s independent organizations have perhaps the strongest political voice. This, however, could be a reaction to the strong conservative political position of the regime, and women’s obviously unequal position within it. If this is less the case in the other countries, that would explain why political mobilization around gender inequality issues has the most legitimacy in radical and critical circles in Poland.

II.

state-socialist gender regimes: before 1989

The state-socialist regimes in Eastern Europe² proclaimed women's emancipation in the late 1940s in ideological conformity to their blueprint, the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, as well as in response to the economic imperatives of industrialization and the political requirements of authoritative regimes (Molyneux 1982). Women were to gain legal equality with men in all areas, household responsibilities were to be taken care of communally, and

all women were expected to become productive members of the community through paid work and political activism. Women's emancipation thus served several goals, most only indirectly considering the needs and interests of women themselves. First, in the post-war context of rapid and extensive industrialization, women's labour was needed to replace men who left clerical work to take up better-paid blue-collar positions in the new steel factories. Second, ideologically, women's emancipation was to contribute to the ultimate victory of the communist cause, not only because women themselves would gain political awareness through paid work and join the proletariat in their international struggle, but also because they would then educate the next generation accordingly. Finally, the party-state usurped the rule of men over their wives in their private households: centralized control was extended to include all subjects of the state (Verderey 1996).

To this end, all state-socialist countries passed a number of acts between the late 1940s and early 1960s that radically altered women's position in Eastern Europe. First and foremost, they passed laws that guaranteed women's equality in legal matters and in politics, as well as in marriage (Molyneux 1982; Wolchik and Meyer 1985). In addition, women as well as men were required to work for wages in the socialist economy. This obligation was enforced through a change in the wage structure that put an end to the family wage, through the modification of the social security system, which now was more closely tied to worker-status rather than wife-status, and through political surveillance and campaigns. Women were expected to work alongside men, do the same jobs, and get the same training, wages and leadership responsibilities. Children were to spend their time in public day-care institutions, and other domestic activities such as cooking and laundry were also supposed to be taken care of in communal facilities.

By the early 1960s, however, the leaders of all of the three Central European states in this study understood the difficulties embedded in attempting this radical reorganization of women's social position. First, the socialization of household chores proved too expensive and was overall not a feasible economic priority in the Cold War era. Second, demographers noted a sharp decline in the birth rate, foreshadowing the vision of a shrinking proletariat to fight against what was perceived as growing aggression "in the West". Finally, there was significant public resistance, even among those otherwise supportive of the regime: a man in his capacity as local party leader might have willingly passed regulations to promote women to political positions, but the same man was unhappy to see his wife return home late and serve a pre-cooked meal purchased in the factory canteen for dinner (Corrin 1994; Fodor 2003). As a result, all state-socialist regimes abandoned the most radical version of the women's emancipation project and settled for one that encouraged women's participation in paid work and

2 I use the term "state-socialist" to refer to the political and economic regimes in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland after the Second World War. The term comprehends the regimes' immediate political motivations (socialism) and their most important characteristic: state-centredness. When, however, I refer to the ideological commitments of the political leaders, I use the term "communist" because this is how they described themselves.

A note on geographical designations is in order. I will use the term "Eastern Europe" to refer to post-state-socialist countries in general, without ignoring the vast differences across them or implying any negative connotation to "Eastern". In addition, I refer to the three in my study as "Central Europe", as a more precise identification of their geographic location.

politics, but allowed them to do so at a level inferior to men (Einhorn 1993). Little effort was made to reduce the wage gap (which was only marginally lower than in Western European countries) or to abolish job segregation and promote women to managerial positions (especially those associated with a degree of real power). Absolutely no effort was made to reorganize the distribution of household responsibilities. Yet women could work, were paid wages that represented a significant part of the family's budget and were entitled to social provisions in their own rights, especially if they were mothers (Kligman 1998; Haney 2002). By the end of the 1980s, 76 per cent of Hungarian and 57 per cent of Polish women of working age were considered economically active (see table 2 below). These percentages were significantly higher than comparable statistics from Western capitalist societies in the 1980s, but they were not uniform across Eastern Europe. Women's employment rates in Poland were lower than those in Hungary (or in the Czech Republic, from which exactly comparable figures are not available).³

In addition to responsibilities in paid work, women were charged with all household tasks in a shortage economy with constantly shrinking provisions for “non-productive”, service amenities. As a result, women of the state-socialist generations carried a heavy double, in many cases triple, burden all through their productive and reproductive lives.

Nevertheless, the emancipation campaign had some positive features, which now have consequences for women's labour-market position in Eastern and East Central Europe. First is the long history of women's legal equality and labour-force participation: generations of women grew up expecting a lifelong, full-time career in the labour force. Second, women achieved high levels of education; this was perhaps the most successful part of the state-socialist emancipation campaign and allowed women an equal share in secondary and post-secondary schooling (Szelenyi 1998). Third was the expectation of a state that guaranteed a variety of social provisions. In the late 1960s all three countries in this study (like most other state-socialist countries) redefined “needs” and introduced measures that allowed women to “balance” work and childrearing; that is to say, they reconsidered women's relationship to the state and allowed—in fact encouraged—motherhood as a legitimate form of identification (Haney 2002). Typically this meant provision of long, paid maternity leave with job guarantees, as well as paid days off in case of an illness or other caretaking responsibilities. Women as well as men came to rely on these provisions, which were introduced several decades earlier than similar measures in most developed countries.

Against this backdrop, the societies of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland were radically transformed in 1989–90: the state-socialist political regimes collapsed and the economies were liberalized, privatized and opened up toward investments and trade from Western countries. As part of this transformation process, about a third of all jobs were lost and open unemployment—a phenomenon unknown to the state-socialist generations—appeared on the political and economic scene. Exactly at the time when social inequalities started to grow, the state welfare systems were being dismantled, due to the admitted financial crises of the states as well as to an overall shift in their commitment toward the population's welfare (Haney 2002; Gal and Kligman 2000a). As the real value of wages declined, social benefits were cut back and lost their values, social inequalities increased rapidly, and poverty became visible, deeper and longer term.

3 Studies in the late 1970s showed that the percentage of economically active women in the 15–54 age group stood at 84.3 per cent in 1970 in Czechoslovakia. Liba Paukert (1991) adds that women's activity rates reached a peak in the 1970s and started to decline as early as the 1980s. Similar trends are observable in the other two countries as well, although the decline is slight. There are no definitive studies (that I know of) that explain the variation across the three countries. The low activity rates of Polish women in the late 1980s, however, may be due to the conservative influence of the Catholic Church or, even more likely, to a high proportion of women being classified as “helping family members” and working in agriculture on private family farms in Poland.

In addition to the economic crises, an ideological backlash against the emancipation programme of the communist regimes ensued. The dissident movements that helped dismantle the communist system, and whose leading figures became the first leaders of the post-communist political regimes, were known for their lack of attention to gender issues and their often conservative positions on women's public roles (Kenney 1999; Einhorn 1993). As right-wing parties moved into the parliaments of post-communist Eastern Europe and started to grapple with growing unemployment, the discourse on the significance of women's paid employment changed: the new ruling parties placed women back in their kitchens, and saw their roles as exclusively raising children and occupying positions from which they could best support their working husbands (Rueschemeyer 1998). Public opinion polls tended to support the same ideas. Researchers have found that in general East Europeans are more likely to hold the view that scarce jobs should go to men, in preference to women (Wilcox et al. 2003).⁴ While on average only 24 per cent of Western European female respondents agreed with the views outlined above (according to the *World Values Survey*), 44 per cent of Hungarian and 52 per cent of Polish and Czech women did. Similarly, while only about 55 per cent of Western European women agreed that "being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for wages", 73 per cent of Hungarian women (although only 37 per cent of Czech women) did (*World Values Survey*). In this context, political mobilization to encourage women to work, or even just to fight against gender inequality in the labour market, proved rather unpopular and lacking in serious legitimacy (Gal and Kligman 2000b; Montgomery 2003).

For all these reasons, researchers expressed concern that women would be the ultimate losers in the transition from state socialism to democratic capitalism in Eastern Europe.⁵ This expectation also followed from the experience (and theory) of women in other developing countries who suffered disproportionately when their countries joined the global economy (Tiano 1994; Sittirak 1998).

Over a decade after the demise of state socialism, this might be a good time to explore this question in depth. What follows is a review of women's labour-market position in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland: its conditions and locations, rewards and demands. I also assess state support for women's work, as well as social provisions to allow workers to combine paid and unpaid labour and move back and forth between the two. The goal of this effort is not merely to assess the current state of gender inequality, however, but to develop a framework that would describe the differences—as well as the similarities—across the three countries.

4 Obviously, opinion polls reflect not only how people think about an issue but also how they feel they are expected to think. In this situation, the perception of scarce work opportunities, coupled with the dearth of even a language of women's emancipation, might lead people to misrepresent or not be able to voice their opinions to survey collectors. Nevertheless, with all this taken into account, the percentage differences are large and consistent across countries, questions and surveys, so it is possible that there is indeed a difference of opinion in this matter between Western and Eastern European women.

5 Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993; Paukert 1995.

III.

women and men at work: 1990–2001

In this section I describe the most important characteristics of women's labour-market position in the three countries in the study.⁶ I compare and contrast the countries, pointing out similarities as well as differences in a variety of dimensions that describe and determine women's position in paid and unpaid labour. A summary and discussion of these somewhat diverse trends follows at the end of this section.

First, however, it may be useful to assess the general economic status of the three countries before we continue with the analysis. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are three of the most developed economies in the region, with gross domestic products (GDPs) ranging from \$9,685 in Poland, to \$15,099 in the Czech Republic. Only Slovenia had a higher GDP per capita (and a higher rank on the Human Development or Gender Development Indices) in 2001. While the three countries differed significantly in their privatization processes—Poland used a radical shock-therapy approach, while the Czech Republic opted for a more peaceful, voucher-type privatization, and Hungary navigated somewhere in between, incorporating elements of both—by the end of the millennium all three countries had set out on a somewhat bumpy path of economic growth. In addition, all three joined the European Union in May 2004, and have functioning political democracies and liberal capitalist economies in place.

The major change in the employment structures of the countries—a point that will be relevant for a discussion of changes in gender relations—is shown by the figures in lines 3–4 of table 1. Activity rates dropped sharply between 1990 and 2000, especially in Hungary and Poland. In addition, before 1989 all companies were in state hands, and thus almost everyone was employed in public, state-owned enterprises. By 2001, however, the majority of the employed populations in each country worked in privately owned companies. Poland differs slightly from the other two in this respect because a large number of farms had remained in private hands during the communist era, so that the change was the least radical here; nevertheless, the same pattern can be observed everywhere.

TABLE 1
GENERAL BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS
OF THE THREE COUNTRIES, 2001

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
GDP per capita (\$ at PPP)	15,099	13,447	9,685
Export growth rate (2000–1)	111.3%	107.8%	112%
Percentage change in labour force participation rates. (1990–2000)	–4%	–20%	–9%
Private sector employment (1985 » 2001)	0.26% » 68.2%	4.2% » 57.4% (plus 6.5% mixed)	30.5% » 74.8%
GDI* rank 2001	32	36	35

Notes: PPP: Purchasing power parity.

GDI: Gender Development Index.

Source: *Human Development Report 2001*; Pollert 2003; Fultz et al. 2003.

6 Data for this paper come from three primary sources. Data on women's labour market position are derived from Pollert (2003), a report funded by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, in the context of a project led by Anna Pollert. The report is a compilation and analysis of data collected in the 10 candidate countries from each country's statistical yearbooks, as well as published EUROSTAT information. In addition, the European Foundation conducted a survey in each of the 10 countries, and I will also be presenting data from this survey, designated "European Foundation, 2001". The third source is the information I collected in 2000–1 in Hungary and Poland (as well as Romania) on social rights, and this is supplemented by more up-to-date data from a recent publication by the ILO (Fultz et al. 2003). Much of the quantitative information in the tables comes from the above sources.

III.A.

Women and men in paid occupations

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

State-socialist countries were notable for their high rate of female labour-force participation. Women as well as men were obliged to work, and statistics counted women on maternity leave as “economically active”, boosting the numbers to well over 70–80 per cent. In addition, the retirement age in at least some state-socialist countries was set quite low. In Hungary, for example, the limit was 55 years of age for women and 60 for men, while in Czechoslovakia women could retire between 53 and 57. Although women’s life expectancy was higher than that of men, they could withdraw from the labour force earlier, partially as a reward for their childrearing responsibilities.

The most obvious and alarming change in the labour market after 1990 was the radical decline in employment levels. Table 2 describes activity rates: that is, the proportion of those aged 15–64 who were employed or actively looking for work in the three countries in selected years.

	Czech Republic		Hungary		Poland	
	1990	2001	1990	2001	1988	2001
Male	n.d.	71.9	83.8	67.8	74.3	64.3
Female	n.d.	67.9	75.9	52.4	57.0	49.7
Total	66.3	70.0	80.0	60.0	65.3	56.6

Source: Pollert 2003; Fultz et al. 2003.

While in the late 1980s and early 1990s activity rates were significantly higher in all three state-socialist societies than in Western capitalist countries, by 2001 two of the three countries exhibited overall, and specifically female, labour-force participation rates lower than the European average (where female participation is 60.1 per cent). Women’s activity rates are highest in the Czech Republic (67.9 per cent) but much lower in Hungary (52.4 per cent) and Poland (49.7 per cent). The change in activity rates affected men and women differently: in Hungary, for example, where the drop

was steepest, women’s employment rates declined from 75.9 per cent in 1990 to 52.4 per cent in 2000 (a 23.5 percentage point decline), while men’s dropped by 16 percentage points from 83.8 per cent to 67.8 per cent. In Poland, men’s labour force participation rates dropped from 74.3 per cent to 64.3 per cent (a 10 percentage point change), and women’s from 57 per cent to 49.7 per cent (7.3 percentage points) (Fultz et al. 2003:44, 267).

However, a possibly important difference between Hungary and Poland should be pointed out. In Hungary, part of the reason for the low levels of women’s economic activity in 2001 is the legacy of the very early retirement age for women (55 years of age in Hungary, compared with 60 in Poland). While this threshold is being shifted up to 62 years for both sexes, generations of women have been retiring young, and are still retiring earlier than their European counterparts. If we compare activity rates for women between the ages of 25 and 54 in Hungary to those for similar age groups in the European Union, we find almost no difference in the percentages: European Union, 71.6 per cent; Hungary, 70 per cent (*The Hungarian Labour Market* 2003). This indicates that the low levels of women’s activity may be at least partially due to differences in legislation concerning retirement, and are likely to change in the near future. The situation in Poland is more complex, because here the retirement

age has always been 60 for women, although women could and often did take early retirement (until the law changed in 1999). Nevertheless, the low percentages of economically active men and women in the Hungarian and Polish labour markets constitute a serious concern and are among the focal points of labour-market policy goals in both countries.

The three countries also exhibit widely differing rates of unemployment (see table 3). First, overall unemployment levels are very high in Poland; indeed they are the highest among the Eastern European EU member countries. Hungary has low overall unemployment rates, and women are not (and since 1990 have never been) more likely to be unemployed than men. In fact, only 38 per cent of the unemployed are women in Hungary, whereas they make up over 50 per cent in the other two countries.⁷

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
Male	6.6	6.3	16.9
Female	9.6	4.9	20.1
Total	8.1	5.6	18.4

Source: Labour-force surveys of respective countries, 2001.

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
Male	51.9	42.3	42.4
Female	53.3	39.2	48.3
Total	52.6	41.1	45.3

Source: Labour-force surveys of respective countries, 2001.

Not only are women more likely than men to be unemployed in the Czech Republic and Poland, they are also likely to remain out of work longer, which suggests that they have more trouble finding jobs. This is not the case in Hungary, where women are under-represented among the long-term unemployed as well. A number of factors may account for the Hungarian discrepancy, although no definitive explanation has yet been offered. For example, it is possible that when Hungarian women get discouraged by bleak labour-market prospects, they have easier access to long-term medical leave and early retirement options, and so define themselves in those terms rather than as unemployed. Others argue that the availability of informal work reduces the ranks of those who claim to be “economically active”: a number of those seemingly inactive work tax-free in informal jobs (*Hungarian Labour Market 2003*). In addition, generous maternity-leave policies may allow more women in Hungary than in Poland to withdraw from the labour force to raise children (*Hungarian Labour Market 2003:17*). In sum, an early retirement age, the availability of informal work and generous maternity-leave policies contribute to low levels of economic activity but also of unemployment rates for women in Hungary.

Finally, a note on changes in employment/activity prospects. Table 5 describes the relative change in activity and employment rates in the past five years in each country.⁸ The situation is most promising in Hungary, where female employment rates increased by almost 3 percentage points, while Poland in particular registered significant job losses: an over 5 percentage point decline in employment rates (with men experiencing slightly harder times than women). Job losses have been moderate in the Czech Republic.

7 In this respect, Hungary is not unique. In six of the post-communist countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Slovakia), we find higher unemployment rates for men than for women (*Hungarian Labour Market 2003*).

8 The “activity rate” describes the proportion of those working or looking for work (the unemployed) of the working age population in each country. “Employment rates” exclude the unemployed and count only those who have jobs.

TABLE 5
CHANGES IN ACTIVITY AND EMPLOYMENT RATES, 1995–2000

	Czech Republic		Hungary		Poland	
	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Employment</i>
Male	1.5	-2.1	0.1	2.4	-3.1	-6.0
Female	2.4	-1.5	2.1	2.6	-2.3	-4.7
Total	2.3	-1.0	1.2	2.5	-2.6	-5.2

Source: Labour Force Surveys of respective countries, 2003.

Each of the three countries has introduced unemployment benefits and training programmes for the unemployed, and set aside special resources to finance this (for example, the National Labour Market Fund in Hungary). Benefits are calculated on the basis of previous income for the first period (260 days in Hungary and 6–18 months in Poland) and the unemployed receive between 30 and 60 per cent of their previous wages. After this period other forms of support may be obtained from local governments (although in Hungary, for example, “public labour” is required). The unemployment benefits barely provide enough for subsistence, and most often thrust people into abject poverty unless they soon find another job on either the formal or the informal labour market.⁹

As mentioned already, a significant number of both men and women have been allowed to take early retirement in all three countries.¹⁰ This does not mean unemployment, but the opportunity to start collecting pensions several (usually between one and three) years before the official retirement age. This was one of the most widespread ways in which companies laid off workers, especially at the beginning of the 1990s, and was one of the reasons that the proportion of inactive people (about 65 per cent of whom are pensioners, young pensioners or people on permanent sick leave) increased drastically in this period (Fultz et al. 2003). Pensions are at least a source of stable income, and in Poland and Hungary the governments have made efforts to adjust pensions to increases in the real value of wages. However, they are often not enough for people to make ends meet, especially women, whose lifetime earnings are usually lower than those of men. Thus pensioners, among whom women are over-represented, are likely to be at greater risk of poverty unless some supplementary income source is found.

What overall trends can we draw from the employment patterns of men and women described above? First, employment and activity rates for both men and women declined sharply in all three countries after 1990 and are *very low* in at least two of the countries included in this study. Czech women, most probably because of the lower job loss overall, seem to have been in the best position to stay economically active. Polish women, already more often classified as inactive¹¹ than elsewhere in 1989, were also the most likely to end up unemployed or

9 Training programmes for the unemployed are available in each of the countries. In Poland special programmes have been introduced to target women, but these are costly and there are not sufficient to meet the needs of the vast majority of unemployed women.

10 About a third of all inactive retirees in 2002 are of working age in Hungary, for example. Among all inactive working age retirees, 43 per cent are women, which is somewhat lower than their share of the economically active population (45 per cent in 2002). In Hungary, at least, women are not over-represented among the inactive early retiree population (*Hungarian Labour Market* 2003).

11 The classification schemes and people’s understanding of what constitutes “work”, along with their discomfort about admitting to working in the informal economy, should also be taken into account here. No serious studies have assessed the effects of these factors, which nevertheless surely influence the construction of “activity” and “employment” rates.

otherwise jobless in 2001. The radically reduced and currently low levels of economic activity in Hungary, as well as the extremely high proportion of the inactive population, are explained by the legacy of an early retirement age, the recent increase in retirement age limits without an expansion of the labour market, and generous maternity-leave policies in this country (in addition to the massive disappearance of jobs in the early 1990s).

Women's activity rates are well below the EU average (60 per cent) or the average of the EU accession countries (61 per cent) in Hungary (52 per cent) and Poland (50 per cent). This low rate is a very new phenomenon in Hungary, where the drop was the sharpest, while it represents both a decline and a simultaneous continuation of earlier trends in Poland. Only the Czech Republic stands out with its reduced, but still relatively high, female activity rates of 68 per cent. The differences across the three countries are thus explained by a combination of factors: the state-socialist legacy of low retirement ages and the influence of gender ideology, as well as the structure of the economy (especially agricultural work opportunities within the household) and the availability of social support which encourages mothers (but not fathers) to de-commodify their labour power. Yet low economic activity rates cause problems for a number of obvious reasons. While both men and women seem to give preference to providing jobs for men when these are scarce, and are overall more amenable to women's withdrawing from the labour force, in practice very few families can afford the resulting loss of income, and women's lack of gainful employment often exposes a family to poverty. Indeed, in Poland and Hungary at least, research has found a significantly higher risk of poverty in households as the proportion of inactive members increased, and the typical poor family in these countries consists of a working husband and an inactive wife raising young children (Fodor 2003). In addition, high divorce rates and unstable social policy measures place women who are outside the labour force in a particularly vulnerable position.

THE QUALITY OF EMPLOYMENT: THE WAGE GAP AND JOB SEGREGATION

Employment in and of itself, however, does not tell the whole story. Women's wages are lower than those of men in all three countries in this study. The gap varies from roughly 30–35 per cent in Poland (for blue and white-collar workers), to a little less than 20 per cent in Hungary.¹² What is striking, however, is that contrary to expectations, the wage gap in fact declined in at least two of the three countries (Hungary and the Czech Republic) between 1989 and 1995, although it started to increase again from the mid-1990s. This means that until then women temporarily managed to improve their labour-market position, at least in Hungary and the Czech Republic, although they tended to lose some ground at the end of the decade. Similar trends have been found elsewhere in the region as well.

Occupational segregation is a significant contributor to the wage gap and its changes in Eastern Europe, as elsewhere (see for example, Reskin and Roos 1991). For example, Brainerd (2000) argues that the wage gap declined in several post-state-socialist societies after 1989, a change which she claims was partially due to women's better chances of gaining or holding onto reasonably well-paid service sector jobs in fields such as banking and

¹² It should be pointed out immediately, however, that these numbers, and even unfortunately the ranking among countries, change depending on how exactly we calculate the wage gap: whether or not we take only income into account or earnings, whether or not we only consider full-time workers, and whether or not we calculate mean or median wages—to name just a few factors. Other sources report an overall wage gap of 74 per cent for Poland, for example (Nowakowska and Swedrowska 2003), or 20 per cent for workers overall (Fultz et al. 2003).

insurance. Indeed, women had a high share of service sector employment in all three countries: 46.5 per cent in the Czech Republic, 54.4 per cent in Hungary and 54.8 per cent in Poland in 2001 (Pollert 2003:17). Yet these numbers actually represent a decrease over time, since women’s employment declined in the service sector in all countries, as it did in all other sectors. Women dominate the services to a lesser extent than they used to. Nevertheless, looking at the same issue from a different angle, the women who remained in the labour force did seem to cluster more in services in 2001 than in 1990. In the Czech Republic, for example, 29 per cent of women worked in service sector jobs in 1990, while 39 per cent did so in 2001. The respective change in Hungary is from 31 per cent to 34 per cent (the Polish data are unavailable) (Pollert 2003:14). This means that women withdrew or were laid off from service sector jobs less often than from other types of employment. At the same time average wage levels in services increased relative to other sectors, contributing to a slight decline in the wage gap in the early 1990s.

A similar possible explanation for the closing of the wage gap is a selection bias after women in the lower earnings categories—to a greater extent than men—left the labour market, became discouraged and never returned.¹³ The patterns in Hungary and the Czech Republic support both these arguments, but this only explains the situation until the mid-1990s. The negative change after 1995—observable in other areas as well—is cause for concern: it might indicate the precarious nature of women’s “revalued resources” (Fodor 1997) and the possibility of losing these as men reposition themselves, regain strength and take over.

	Czech Republic	Hungary*	Poland (white-collar only)**
1988–1999	70.6	72.1	70.8
1995–1996	78.3	80.2	64.9
1999–2000	73.8	80.1	65.2

Notes: * author’s calculations from table 7, p. 49 in Fultz et al. 2003.

** Data are for 1985, 1995 and 1997, respectively. Blue-collar gaps: 65.2, 68.9, 69.6.

Source: Fultz et al. 2003.

After the mid-1990s the wage gap increased both overall and *within* the service sector, where the ratio moved from 73 per cent in 1996 to 65.5 per cent by 1996 (Czech Republic) and from 88 per cent to 86 per cent for the same period in Hungary (Pollert 2004:25). This means that by the end of the 1990s we can perceive a sharpening segregation of women within the most female-dominated industrial sectors. Especially within elite, high-paying, service sector jobs we find that women tend to occupy the lower end of the wage hierarchy, contributing to an increase in the wage gap within sectors by the end of the decade. A good example of this phenomenon (men’s advances into previously female areas) is the occupational and sectoral category “financial mediation” (financial services) (table 7), although we find the same pattern in “hotels and tourism” and in “real estate” occupations. In the state-socialist era, positions in financial mediation were not particularly powerful or well paid because enterprises had little financial independence; even the financial director of a company was barely more than a chief accountant in a non-competitive market acting under strict financial directives. In addition, banking and other financial services were rudimentary—and thus devalued and feminized. After 1989 all this changed: banking became one of the most booming sectors, salaries shot up, and its prestige and importance increased. For a moment, women in the financial sector were well positioned: they had the skills, the experience and the connections to take advantage of the newly arising opportunities. Within a few years, however, an

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13 The reduction in the wage gap is clearly not due to a “downward harmonization”—a decline in men’s wages—but rather to a faster increase in women’s (at least nominal) pay compared to that of men. Since *real* wages (adjusted to the inflation in consumer prices) declined in all three countries in the first half of the decade, a more precise way of stating the above is that women’s real wages declined at a lower rate than those of men.

TABLE 7
THE EXAMPLE OF BANKING AND FINANCIAL SERVICES: TRENDS IN THE WAGE GAP AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

	Czech Republic		Hungary		Poland	
	<i>Percentage of women</i>	<i>F/M wage ratio</i>	<i>Percentage of women</i>	<i>F/M wage ratio</i>	<i>Percentage of women</i>	<i>F/M wage ratio</i>
Mid-1990s	70.0	66.9	71.3	66.9	70.7	68.4
2000	61.8	52.1	69.2	58.9	58.6	67.1

Source: Pollert 2003.

increasing number of men started to claim jobs in financial mediation, and after the mid-1990s, parallel to this, we see an increase in the wage gap as well. In Hungary, for example, women made about 33 per cent less than men in jobs in banking, accounting and other financial services in 1994—already the largest pay gap exhibited by any sector. By 2001, however, this gap had increased to over 40 per cent as the proportion of women in the sector shrank. Not only are women being forced out; those who manage to stay are increasingly ghettoized in the lower-paid end of the sector as those at the top increase their privileges. As table 7 shows, the trends are exactly the same in the Czech Republic and Poland.

The wage gap is highest in the financial sector described above, but it also exists to a varying degree throughout the others. The patterns here are similar in all countries: wage differences are smallest in those sectors and occupations that are most segregated. In public administration or education, for example, where the staff are predominantly women, the gap is 15–20 per cent (and the wage levels are quite low); in agriculture, which is predominantly male, it is 12 per cent, while in fishing, where we find almost no women, there is actually a negative gap. Jobs where women tend to work are devalued and on average pay less than male-dominated ones, and men who work in feminized occupations also pay a price, although often to a lesser extent (Williams 1995). Such trends were observed in these countries even before the demise of state socialism, and are also familiar from Western Europe and North America.

Finally, the overall patterns of sectoral segregation (table 8) are very similar in all three countries, and similar to those in other developed capitalist societies as well. The one difference is that the size of the service sector is smaller in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia than in most Western countries, although women dominate these sectors in the East too. Very few women are to be found in agricultural work and construction; the field in

TABLE 8
SECTORAL SEGREGATION, 2001: PERCENTAGE OF MEN AND WOMEN EMPLOYED IN DIFFERENT SECTORS

	Czech Republic		Hungary		Poland	
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
Agriculture	5.0	2.9	8.4	3.5	2.5	1.0
Industry	36.0	26.4	29.5	24.2	41.8	22.6
Construction	12.6	1.6	11.8	1.2	10.2	1.7
Services	35.7	39.0	33.5	34.0	29.7	29.4
Public sector	10.6	30.2	16.8	37.1	15.7	45.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Pollert 2003.

which they predominate is clearly the public sector (health, education and public administration) everywhere. Men dominate industrial jobs, and an important reason for the wage gap is that these jobs are usually much better paid than those in public administration and many of those in the service sector. This, however, is a familiar story and there were no significant differences in these general patterns among the three countries in 2001, nor between then and 1989 for that matter, apart from the already mentioned expansion of the service sector. If anything, the similarity—across countries different in so many other ways—is what is most striking about the pattern.

Tables 9, 10a and 10b describe occupational segregation, this time in terms of occupations, not industrial sectors. The pattern we see here is interesting but not new in state-socialist countries: women constitute the majority of workers who have professional and semi-professional occupations. They make up 53 per cent of all professional job holders in the Czech Republic, 57 per cent in Hungary and 63 per cent in Poland. In the first two countries women have in fact increased their levels in these fields since 1995, although only slightly relative to men. These percentages are higher than corresponding numbers in the “old” EU countries (50 per cent). Such levels are more common in post-state-socialist societies (the average for recent EU member states is 63 per cent), which emphasized women’s education but inhibited their advancement in the power structures. Thus a large number of women stayed in professional jobs, never advancing to positions of authority. These jobs, often in public administration, health or education, allowed many women to combine family and work responsibilities to the best effect.

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
Legislator	26.2	34.4	40.6
Professional	52.5	57.3	63.8
Technician	53.0	64.5	67.0
Clerk	79.2	92.6	73.3
Service	64.5	54.7	57.9
Skilled agriculture	40.6	28.3	36.5
Craft	15.2	18.0	18.6
Plant operators	25.2	28.7	16.9
Unskilled work	58.6	54.4	60.4

Source: Pollert 2003.

Women also dominate the semi-professional, technical and clerical categories, where ghettoization is pronounced. In Hungary, for example, almost 93 per cent of clerical workers are women; the comparable percentages are 79 per cent in the Czech Republic and “only” 64 per cent in Poland. Segregation is thus most pronounced in Hungary in this respect.

We can also examine where the majority of women hold jobs in the three Central European countries: that is, the distribution of women across (not within) occupations. Here we find that the majority of women work in professional, semi-professional or clerical jobs: 50–63 per cent in the three countries overall, with Poland having the highest proportion. One category is interesting to follow over time: managerial and legislative positions (table 10a). After 1989 the proportion of women in parliament declined spectacularly, and researchers feared a similar withdrawal of women from other positions of authority (Matland and Montgomery 2003). While comparable data are not available, it seems that no such major change has occurred—at least not since 1995—in lower levels of power. The authority gap between men and women is stable: about 2.3 times more men than women have positions of authority in the Czech Republic, and about 1.6 times more in Hungary.

Table 10b shows a similar pattern but examines positions of authority from a different angle: that of the position of supervisory authority. Men are significantly more likely to supervise a large number of people at work. According to the survey conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Working and Living Conditions, among the employed populations over three times as many men as women supervise more than 10 people in Poland, while the corresponding ratio is around 1.8 in Hungary and the Czech Republic (table 10b).

TABLE 10A
THE RATIO OF WOMEN IN MANAGERIAL POSITIONS

	Czech Republic		Hungary		Poland	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1995	8.1	3.8	6.9	4.4	n.a.	4.6
2000	9.0	3.9	8.1	5.2	n.a.	4.2
Gap in 1995	0.47		0.63		n.a.	
Gap in 2000	0.43		0.64		n.a.	

Note: Defined as in the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88), category 1.

Source: Pollert 2003.

TABLE 10B
PERCENTAGE OF MEN AND WOMEN IN MANAGERIAL POSITIONS, 2001

	Czech Republic			Hungary			Poland		
	Men	Women	Average	Men	Women	Average	Men	Women	Average
Has 10+ subordinates	5.0	2.7	4.0	5.7	3.2	4.6	8.3	2.7	5.8
Gap	0.54			0.56			0.32		

Source: European Foundation 2001.

HUMAN CAPITAL, JOB EXPERIENCE, TRAINING

The previous section described changes in the wage gap and two of the most important factors that may explain it: occupational segregation, vertical and horizontal, and the devaluation of women's work and skills. Other possible factors should also be considered. Discrimination itself is difficult to measure, although there is anecdotal evidence of discrimination against women, especially those of reproductive age, in all three countries. East European societies stand out, however, in the low influence of *human capital* on the wage gap.

State-socialist regimes were quick to encourage women's education for a number of political and economic reasons. On the one hand, by the 1970s an expansion in schooling helped offset the increasing scarcity of job opportunities, and state-socialist policy makers were also convinced that time spent in the state school system reformed people's thinking and turned them into true communists. To this end, women were also encouraged to remain in education, and by the early 1980s the proportion of women in post-secondary training equalled that of men (Szelenyi 1998). By the late 1990s, women in the labour force were better educated than men in almost all state-socialist countries. A good example is Hungary, where over 58 per cent of college graduate employees were women. In Poland women also outdo men in their rate of college education. In the Czech Republic, however, only 39 per cent of college graduate employees are women, which indicates a significant disadvantage. Here too, however, as in the other two countries, women are vastly over-represented among holders of second degrees. In sum, women in the labour force tend to have higher degrees, and overall spend more years in formal education than men. In addition, while educational segregation is widespread and women dominate in the humanities,

education and nursing, they are also equally or nearly equally represented in business colleges, economic studies, medicine and the law. In short, women are just as well, or better, prepared for the labour market as men.

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
Male	21.4	15.6	11.9
Female	21.1	19.3	11.2
Total	21.3	17.2	11.6
N	1002	993	992

Note: N= number of respondents.
Source: European Foundation 2001.

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
Male	10.4	11.7	10.8
Female	9.5	11.7	11.6
Total	10.0	11.7	11.2
N	1024	1002	993

Note: N= number of respondents (all were in employment; the self-employed and owners of businesses were not included in the survey).
Source: European Foundation 2001.

Once they find a job, women are no less likely than men to receive training at work—another important piece of human capital. This is significant, because it means that companies invest in women’s training just as much as they do in men’s: they do not generally treat women merely as unreliable, short-term labour. In Hungary, in fact, as table 11 demonstrates (using self-reports from a representative survey of employees in the three countries), women are more likely than men to receive training from their companies, and similar proportions are found in the other two countries.

Work experience is another element of human capital used in econometric models to account for the wage gap. In this respect also, Czech, Hungarian and Polish women—unlike those in most EU countries—do not seem to lag behind men at all. According to the survey described above, women and men have worked for similar average periods both in their specific jobs and at their companies. For example, table 12 shows that on average Polish women have spent 11.6 years doing their current jobs, compared with 10.8 for men: a slight advantage to women. A very similar picture emerges with respect to the average period spent at a given company.

Men, however, spend a higher number of hours at their paid jobs. Part-time work is unpopular with post-state-socialist employers (partly because state regulations do not allow discounts in social security payments for part-time employees, as for example in Hungary). Although a significant proportion of female employees claim they would prefer to work part time, very few can afford or are able to do so. The gender gap is largest in the Czech Republic in this respect, where according to the European Foundation survey, 12.5 per cent of all female employees work part time, compared with 3.7 per cent of male employees. The corresponding percentages are much lower (4–6 per cent) in the other two countries, with very little gender difference.

In terms of the mean number of hours, men do have a distinct advantage; according to table 13, they work on average three or four hours longer each week compared to women. (These figures are on average higher, especially for women, than those shown by a comparable survey by the same foundation in other EU countries in 2000.) In addition, men are more likely than women to do overtime work. Table 14 shows that men and women spend on average from four to six days a month working more than 10 hours a day. Men, however, do this more often than women.

TABLE 13
MEAN HOURS OF WORK, 2001

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
Male	43.9	43.9	45.3
Female	39.7	41.4	41.4
Average	42.0	42.3	43.5
N	952	984	924

Note: N= number of respondents (all were in employment; the self-employed and owners of businesses were not included in the survey).

Source: European Foundation 2001.

TABLE 14
MEAN NUMBER OF DAYS WHEN RESPONDENT WORKED OVER 10 HOURS IN PREVIOUS MONTH, 2001

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
Male	5.6	4.8	7.0
Female	3.8	2.8	5.0
Average	4.8	3.9	6.1
N	1031	1003	1002

Note: N= number of respondents.

Source: European Foundation 2001.

In sum, aside from the number of hours worked, human capital factors do not contribute significantly to the wage gap in post-state-socialist societies. This is not the case in other developed countries, where significant differences still exist between the educational attainment, and especially the job market experience, of men and women. I also considered occupational segregation and mentioned direct discrimination as contributing factors. Last, let us consider the unequal distribution of unpaid work, which has also been linked to women's inferior position in the labour market (Reskin and Roos 1991).

UNPAID WORK: DOMESTIC WORK AND CHILDCARE

One of the most important sources of women's labour-market disadvantage is their disproportionate responsibility for household chores and childcare. This is one area where relatively little change can be seen since 1989. State-socialist societies did not attempt to transform the gendered division of labour in the household, and most certainly did not try to encourage men to do more domestic work. Childcare was the only area of reproductive work where the state took some responsibility. Although not always of the highest quality, childcare was free, accessible and regularly used, especially for children between three and six years of age, allowing women time to undertake paid work.

Perhaps surprisingly, in view of the deep concern of many researchers, childcare for the group aged between three and six years old has remained widely available in the three countries in this study. Very few children under the age of three spend time in institutional care, however. These arrangements were not very popular before 1989 either, but the proportion of places in nursery schools (for infants under three years of age) declined somewhat after 1989. (Maternity-leave policies cover this period in some of the countries—see my discussion below.) In Hungary, for example, 13.7 per cent of children below the age of two were enrolled in nursery schools in 1990, but this percentage dropped to 8.8 per cent by 1999 (Fultz et al. 2003:64).

The demand for and supply of kindergarten places (for the three to six-year-old age group), however, is significantly higher. In Hungary, 86 per cent of children in the target age range attend kindergarten; about 17,000 places were lost in the past decade, but at the same time 30,000 fewer children were born (Lukacs and Frey 2003). Places are becoming more expensive, but they are often subsidized for underprivileged families and thus are still widely affordable, as the usage figures attest. Most kindergartens in Hungary are run by state or local governments, although a few private and religious organizations have daycare centres.

In Poland, in contrast, the cost of childcare is becoming a serious problem. Here, the proportion of children in daycare institutions has always been lower than in Hungary. The number of children under two years of age in nursery schools fell from 44,000 to 23,000 in the 1990s, although this change was accompanied by a decline of over 150,000 in births in the same period. The number of kindergartens was reduced by about a third in the same period, yet this did not result in an overall lower proportion of children attending these institutions. On the contrary, the proportion of children in kindergartens in the three to six-year-old age group increased from 33 per cent to 39 per cent in the period. This paradox is explained by the radical reduction in the number of births mentioned above (Balcerzak-Paradowska et al. 2003:301, table A2.24). The cost of childcare for children aged between three and six years, however, has increased significantly in Poland. While about 20 per cent of families receive support, daycare still places a great financial burden on a significant number of families, and may prevent some from placing their children in childcare institutions.

In the Czech Republic, as in the other two countries, the number of infants in nurseries is very small, less than 2 per cent. The proportion of children aged between three and five who attend kindergarten, however, has increased since 1990, from 89 per cent of the age group to 99.5 per cent, while their absolute numbers has declined due to a drop in the birth rate (Kotynkova et al. 2003:160).

In terms of domestic responsibilities, women continue to do the lion's share of the work: they spend roughly two or three times more hours on household work than men. They are primarily responsible for cooking, cleaning and food shopping in all three societies. In 2002, for example, 78 per cent of Polish women claimed they did all the cooking in the household, 83 per cent did all the washing and 66 per cent all the cleaning (Interim Report, Poland 2003). Similarly, in the Czech Republic, a survey conducted in 2000 revealed that 87 per cent of women were responsible for all the cooking, 74 per cent for all the cleaning and 68 per cent for all the shopping in the household. When asked who "provided for the family", interestingly, 45 per cent of respondents claimed that both men and women did so to a significant degree (while 51 per cent claimed that primarily men did) (Interim Report, Czech Republic 2004). In Hungary in 2000, women spent on average 186 minutes per day on household chores, while men spent less than a third of that, about 71 minutes. In addition, it may be worth noting that the figures for women had in fact decreased since 1986 (Fultz et al. 2003). This is counter-intuitive, because researchers had predicted that women would have to increase their household labour in order to make up for items they could no longer afford to buy and services they could no longer afford to use. While this may be the case for impoverished families, the national trend is in the opposite direction.

In sum, most children between the ages of three and six in Hungary and the Czech Republic, and at least a third of all children in the same age group in Poland, spend their days in institutional daycare. The proportion of children in kindergartens (and thus the availability of childcare slots) varies widely, but it does not seem to have decreased over the past 10 years in the three countries. Its costs, however, may have become prohibitive for some families, especially in Poland, where women's labour-market participation may be hindered by the lack of affordable childcare for children aged between three and six years. In all three countries, we should note the lack of high-quality care for children under three years of age. Never exactly high, both the demand for and the supply of these slots decreased in the 1990s. This is partly due to a sharp decline in the number of births in all three countries after the collapse of the state-socialist political regimes, the relative generosity of maternity-leave policies in at least Hungary and the Czech Republic (see below), and the cultural conviction that young children should be taken care of in their homes, preferably by their mothers (rather than their fathers). These factors make it difficult for mothers of very young children to engage in paid work in all three countries, and most women drop out of the labour force after giving birth. The success of their return is often dubious, and depends on the number of children they have and the length of time they are away, as well as their specific jobs and

employers (Lukacs and Frey 2003). Only haphazard labour-market policies (such as training programmes or the possibility of working part time) address the problems of this group, which is therefore at a significant disadvantage in the labour market.

In general, the fact that women are primarily responsible for childcare and most daily, routine household chores, and as a result spend fewer hours at work and a significant portion of their time on domestic responsibilities, contributes to their inferior labour-market positions in all three societies. It is, however, not this phenomenon but its significance that has increased since 1989 with the advent of the profit motive rather than a mere orientation toward fulfilling the assigned production plan regardless of its cost.

IV.

the de-commercialization of paid work: social rights and gender

In all three countries, women are the primary caretakers of children. As mentioned above, this practice (and cultural conviction) is not new, although it may have grown stronger after the demise of state socialism and the disappearance of the state-socialist emancipation discourse. For this reason, women's careers and their labour-market position can only be understood if we also consider their chances of temporarily de-commercializing their labour power, choosing to stay out of the labour force for extended periods of time while raising children. In this section I compare and contrast these policies and assess their effects on women's participation in paid work.

Family benefits and parental-leave regulations have a long history in the region. State-socialist family and maternity policies were designed to accommodate the state's labour requirements and were important elements of the state's overall social-engineering project.¹⁴ Despite some variation between countries, there were a number of similarities in the ways in which family and maternity policies were formulated in this region. For instance, maternity and family provisions in all three countries supported pro-natalist goals: they aimed at increasing the size of the population and thus the socialist labour force. These goals were accomplished in different ways, from abolishing and criminalizing abortion and making contraception unavailable in some countries (such as Romania, see Kligman 1998) to introducing generous maternity-leave benefits and state contributions to child-rearing (in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and elsewhere). Despite such efforts, birth rates gradually declined in many Eastern European countries (as they did in Western ones) after the 1960s, and continued to do so even more radically after 1990.

Second, in accordance with women's role as wage-earner/mothers, women rather than men were expected to withdraw from the labour force after childbirth. Indeed, maternity-leave policies did not enable fathers to look after children outside the labour force until the mid to late 1980s. State-socialist maternity-leave policies were designed to allow women (and only women) to leave the workforce, but also to guarantee their re-entry to paid work through long-term job protection.

¹⁴ Kligman 1998; Gal and Kligman 2000b; Haney 2002.

The majority of state-socialist maternity-leave regulations remained in effect after the fall of the regimes, and there are still a number of features that the three countries share in this respect (table 15 below). First, each provides a short-term, well-paid leave for insured (that is, working) new mothers upon the birth of children¹⁵—and this birthing leave is extended in the case of a sick child, multiple births or single mothers.¹⁶ Second, following this relatively short leave (14–28 weeks), there are also some provisions available for long-term childrearing leave with (some) pay and, in addition, some social benefits for needy families. While the criteria for receiving this long-term parental leave and benefits vary (and will be discussed below), again there are features they share. First, none provide a living wage, although in at least some countries parental-leave benefits (along with the family allowances) do form a significant part of a family’s budget (this was especially true for Hungary before 2000). Second, while fathers are allowed to take parental leave, they are not encouraged to do so in any of the three countries by means of non-transferable leave which only fathers can take (the only country in the post-state-socialist region to introduce this was Slovenia). As a result, a tiny fraction, less than 1 per cent, of fathers take parental leave. Third, while women’s jobs are protected, the protection is relatively short-term, and a lot of women do lose their jobs. Finally, each country provides a little extra help to single mothers, but again never making up for the wages of a second earner in any real sense.

There are some significant differences among the countries as well, and these differences—mostly in the generosity of and eligibility criteria for the benefits—shape (and at the same time reflect) women’s position in society: the gender regimes and their long-term consequences. Table 15 summarizes the main differences.

The Polish system seems to be significantly different from the other two. In Poland, only the working poor are entitled to receive parental leave and benefits; most women become solely dependent on their families after childbirth. We can describe such arrangements, following Esping-Anderson (1999), as a “familial welfare state”: families, rather than the state are expected to take primary responsibility for dependents. Of the three countries, the Polish state spends the lowest percentage of its GDP on family policies (roughly half as much as the others), so it is not surprising that the number of beneficiaries has been declining. The amount paid out in the form of the parental-leave benefit represents less than 20 per cent of the average wage, and the caring period only counts toward pension entitlements at a discount and up to a limit. Women are not allowed to work while on parental leave, and only a third of all children are in daycare even between the ages of three and six. These provisions represent a male-breadwinner model of welfare, with a slight pro-natalist slant. Women are encouraged to have children through the constant renegotiation and restrictions of abortion rights (Gal and Kligman 2000a) as well as financial incentives to have larger families under the system of family benefits. When middle-class women have children, they are not protected from job loss and the loss of their incomes: they become completely dependent on their spouses, have to withdraw from the labour market and have difficulty finding their way back. With divorce rates increasing, women are in an increasingly vulnerable position in such a system.

15 The terminology of family policies is quite confusing because each country has a slightly different system and a different way of designating each policy. I will use the same terms (even if the actual policies translate slightly differently) to compare the three countries. I refer to: “birthing leave”, leave granted to new mothers with pay; and “parental leave”, a longer-term period of leave offered to both parents after the birthing leave expires. In terms of payments, I differentiate between: “parental-leave benefits”, the pay for parents who look after young children at home; and “family allowances”, which go to families to compensate for the cost of raising children.

16 While this represents technically no change since the state-socialist period, before 1989 almost all women were defined as “active”, and thus insured. This situation changed radically after 1989, as described above, as did the consequences of the eligibility criteria, if not their wording.

TABLE 15
SUMMARY OF BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAIN PARENTAL-LEAVE PROGRAMMES IN THE THREE COUNTRIES

	Czech Republic: family allowance	Hungary: "childcare leave" (GYES,GYET)	Poland: "childraising leave and allowance"
Replacement value of birthing leave	69% for 28 weeks	70% for 24 weeks	100% for 16 weeks
Parental leave – elite track	–	For insured parents special provisions: 70% of wages up to two years.	–
Parental benefit as percentage of average wages	20%	30%	20%
Parental benefit as percentage of minimum wages	60%	96% in 2000, decreased significantly with increase in minimum wage thereafter	56%
Eligibility	Universal	Universal	Income test <i>and</i> insurance
Expenditure on family policies as percentage of GDP	1.9% (2000)	2.0% (2000)	1.06% (1998)
Does parental leave count towards pension?	Yes, 100% even without paying contributions	Yes, 100% in public scheme, but only three years per child (other restrictions also). In second (private) tier, only according to contribution paid	Yes at 70% (up to a third of work history)
Family allowance as percentage of household income	3.7% (1996, of households with children)	n.a.	0.2%
Work allowed?	Very limited: child allowed max. five days a month in daycare	Part time yes, or unlimited at home after age 18 months	No
Pro-natalist?	No: flat rate for each child	Partly: family allowance is higher per child benefit for each child <i>up to</i> the third. Tax credit works against poor (i.e. large) families	Higher fee for third and later children since 1999. Family allowance also varies by number of children.
Number of beneficiaries		Increased; possible slight decline since 2000	Declined after 1990
Fathers	Fathers yes; since 2000 fathers are also eligible for job protection	Fathers yes; grandparents also since 2001	Fathers since 1996

Source: Fultz et al. 2003.

The Czech and the Hungarian systems are more generous and accommodating of women’s needs to divide time between work and family. Here insurance-based benefits are complemented (extensively in Hungary) by universal provisions and some means-tested programmes as well. Benefits paid out on the basis of universal rights have been linked to a lower level of stigmatization as well as stronger political support, more generosity and stability. Hungarian parental benefits are the most extensive and generous. In contrast to those in the Czech Republic, they allow women to work at least part-time, and also encourage training; they relatively rarely use means or income tests as eligibility criteria. In fact, Lukacs and Frey (2003) argue that the high level of support in Hungary discourages a number of low-income women from looking for work, because they can feasibly and comfortably de-commodify their labour power—a point seen as a problem by politicians, but otherwise a reasonable requirement in a welfare state. Although the real value of benefits, especially as compared to the minimum wage, has declined somewhat since 2000, Hungarian family policies are widely used as a result of their relative accessibility and generosity.

Czech policies are broadly similar, although their relative stringency—a more pronounced emphasis on means tests and the fact that they do not allow women to work while on leave—make it harder for women to combine motherhood and wage-earning activities, and also make returning to work more difficult.

What really sets the Hungarian system apart from the Polish and Czech ones is its three-tiered nature. In Poland, one is either eligible to receive parental benefits or not. In Hungary, different types of eligibility criteria create differences in the provisions—different maternity “tracks”—thus producing a welfare system that strongly differentiates among women. (This is also true, although to a much lesser extent, in the Czech Republic.) At the bottom end, all mothers in Hungary are eligible for a flat-rate childcare leave; although this is given as a universal right, the system is quite bureaucratic and discourages large families (more than three children). This approach, as well as the media and political discourse around it, has an implicit racist (as well as class) bias: Roma women, a small, and very impoverished minority in Hungary, tend to take advantage of the system more than non-Roma women, and the state discourages a high number of births in minority families. At the other end of the scale, insured, middle-class women receive 70 per cent of their income for two years, as well as increasing tax credits for raising children. Tax credits are unavailable for those without taxable income, and a large segment of poor—and many minority—families thus do not and cannot use this (Förster and Tóth 1999; Ferge 2000). Thus the Hungarian family-benefit system is characterized by the way it differentiates among women. These differentiations run along the intersections of class and race, and result in an exceptionally generous system for middle-class working women and a deteriorating, lower-level system for the poor (for more detail, see Glass and Fodor 2003).

In sum, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic provide different types of parental benefits to their citizens, and I have argued that these shape women’s labour-market positions significantly in each country. While the benefits are quite generous in Hungary and the Czech Republic, the patterns of their usage potentially exacerbate gender inequalities in the labour market. There is little incentive for men to take parental leave, and even less cultural acceptance that they should do so; thus childcare and childrearing are primarily done by women. When women take advantage of parental-leave policies, they drop out of the labour force, lose seniority and risk being considered unreliable. Their capacity to return to the labour force is tenuous in an unstable labour market where companies disappear quickly and job protection is thus often meaningless. In Poland, on the other hand, means-tested parental benefits and the difficulty of obtaining childcare even for children between three and six years of age make women particularly and more directly dependent on their families for support. While the three systems vary, none guarantees, or even aims to encourage, the reorganization of reproductive work, and this has long-term consequences for gender inequality in paid work as well.

V.

discussion: women's paid and unpaid work in eastern europe since 1989

Scholars disagree about the effects of economic development on women's position in society and on gender inequality. A number of studies have found that gender inequality increases and women's position deteriorates as countries move toward large-scale, global, capitalist production. In this context, women often lose control over the production process, and their access to land, credit and other resources is curbed.¹⁷ In this new division of labour, men leave the household to work in factories, leading to the housewifization of women (Mies 1986)

or, when women themselves are employed by transnational companies, their exploitation is further exacerbated (Tiano 1994; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983).

Others claim that economic development improves women's overall standing and reduces gender inequality in a number of areas such as access to education or employment (Lim 1983). A variation on this argument follows Boserup's (1970) prediction of an inverted U-shaped relationship between economic growth and gender inequality (Lantican et al. 1996; Forsythe et al. 2000): women initially lose out after the transition to an open, competitive market economy, but after a while, as economic development picks up, their position is strengthened.

Eastern Europe is a good test case for development theories. The economies of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland were transformed—practically overnight—into open markets, using much the same techniques as in Asian or African developing countries a few decades earlier. Even the protagonists were similar: the World Bank and the IMF, as well as other financial institutions that provided loans, and prescribed and monitored the processes through which they must be repaid. The three countries in this study were the ones that joined the global capitalist economy most rapidly; hence the deleterious effects should be most easily observable here.

However, we find no radical decline in women's position relative to that of men—although certainly no major improvement either. While employment rates dropped and women's unemployment exceeds that of men in some countries, this is not the case in others. Women lost out, but so did men. The reduction in employment affected men and women similarly, and only their response differed: women were more likely to be discouraged and become homemakers, while men tended to collect unemployment benefits (and probably seek jobs on the informal labour market) and/or take early retirement or permanent sick leave.

On the other hand, the wage gap between men and women decreased after 1989 (even though a backlash seems to have started in some of the countries). The reduction in wage differences (even its stagnation) is surprising, given the fact that inequalities otherwise are on the rise.¹⁸

17 Sittirak 1998; Ward 1990; Fernandez Kelly 1983.

18 Wages are not the same as income, because the latter includes earnings from all sources. If men are more likely to gain income from informal sources that are often not included in wage surveys, then the gender gap will seem lower than it really is if all incomes are accounted for. Since almost no reliable information is available on informal labour activities, and especially not on gender differences, only a word of caution can be issued at this point.

Women tend to work in professional or semi-professional jobs, mostly in state-owned companies, or in the services sector in private ones. Men do seem to be beginning to monopolize the most lucrative and powerful positions in private companies and to force some women out or into lower-paid, secondary positions within these sectors. Yet women in all three countries seem to own the necessary human capital to retain at least decent and relatively stable professional if not managerial positions in the economy and state administration.

In sum, globalization, and liberalization did not threaten women's position to the extent that had been expected. This was because Hungarian, Czech and Polish women were in a relatively advantageous labour-market position when the social transformations started; they were nowhere near as vulnerable as their sisters in Asia or Africa. In addition, the declining yet still resistant remains of a strong state-socialist welfare tradition helped alleviate some of the burden of the transition, unlike in other parts of the world. Starting positions thus do matter when assessing the effects of development. Although women's wages, levels of authority and other labour-market privileges did not equal those of men under state socialism, in the second half of the twentieth century women in Eastern Europe gained significant levels of human capital, as well as job experience and a certain level of independence. These resources, along with a history of social protection, proved useful in combating new forms of patriarchal domination introduced in 1989.

While gender inequality did not markedly increase, especially relative to class or racial inequalities, there seems little hope for a real improvement in women's position. In fact, some researchers predict or even observe signs of an increase in gender inequality—some aspects of which have been described above—after the mid-1990s (Glass 2004). There are a number of possible reasons for this pessimistic scenario. Most importantly, in all three countries (even in Poland) political mobilization around gender issues is relatively weak, and lacks widespread legitimacy. This is partly due to the backlash against state socialism, as well as a seemingly more traditional general opinion of women's role in society. Women's political organizations are more likely to fight for the right to work part time than to close the wage gap or for women's promotion chances. Without organized political pressure, gender discrimination in the labour market may become rampant, and women could easily be pushed further into feminized, devalued occupations.

Second, and even more important, capitalist democracies in Eastern Europe are no more committed than their state-socialist precursors to changing the gender division of labour in the household or the meaning and balance of paid work in men's lives. Some countries provide more help for women to integrate work and family, others are more likely to push women in the direction of the household. But even in the more "progressive states" (like Hungary or the Czech Republic), no real effort has been made to provide incentives for men to share child-care and domestic labour, or for employers to redefine what it means to be engaged in paid work and to remove the male bias embedded in the very definition of "the worker". Profit-conscious global capitalists—especially in the absence of organized political pressure—are even less likely to do this than paternalistic state-socialist policy makers. For this reason, East European women may have survived the transition to capitalism without being disproportionately impoverished or forced back into their kitchens, yet they certainly do not seem to have reached the top-floor offices either, and thus these societies missed at least one important chance—the massive social upheaval in the early 1990s—to redefine gender relations and to create a more balanced life for both men and women.

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UNRISD

Palais des Nations

1211 Geneva 10

Switzerland

Phone: +41 (0)22 9173020

Fax: +41 (0)22 9170650

info@unrisd.org

www.unrisd.org

