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Author(s): Marianne A. Ferber and Phyllis Hutton Raabe

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## **Women in the Czech Republic: Feminism, Czech Style**

**Marianne A. Ferber\*<sup>‡</sup> and Phyllis Hutton Raabe<sup>†</sup>**

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Many years after the Velvet Revolution, feminism remains close to a dirty word in the Czech Republic, even among women who share the views of “Western feminists.” Surprisingly, this may in part hark back to the negative views of “bourgeois feminism” propounded by the Communists. Equally surprising is the very high proportion of women who are employed, almost all of them full-time, although they continue to do the lion’s share of homemaking. This strategy enables Czech women to have a high sense of personal efficacy and independence. This paper emphasizes the historical roots of women’s position in Czech society, and the importance of the cultural and social context for the emergence of what we term “Feminism, Czech Style.”

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**KEY WORDS:** feminism; gender equality; family policies; Czech women; Czech Republic.

### **INTRODUCTION**

“We frequently use the same words . . . yet their content is different because different historical experiences underlie the same concept” (Siklová, 1997a, p. 76). This is how one of the foremost women’s scholars in the Czech Republic (CR), who was a prominent dissident in earlier days, characterizes the problem that underlies many of the misunderstandings between what are termed “Western feminists” and women in the post-Communist countries, who are concerned with gender equity. This paper provides information about the historic causes and recent developments that have shaped

\*Professor Emerita of Economics and Women’s Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL.

<sup>†</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>‡</sup>Correspondence should be directed to Marianne A. Ferber, Professor Emerita of Economics and Women’s Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 496 Wohlers Hall, 1206 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820; e-mail: m-ferber@uiuc.edu.

the culture, institutions and economic circumstances in the CR, which help to explain the present attitudes and strategies of Czech women. Thus, while recognizing their importance in shaping real differences between activist women in the CR and feminists in the West as well as other formerly Communist bloc countries,<sup>1</sup> we also note the extent to which the goals of both groups coincide. Notably, the strategy of Czech women focuses on maintaining and improving their position in the labor market but without reducing their primary role in the family.

The concept of "Western feminism" is, of course, an oversimplification, in part because the term "Western," which usually includes Australia and New Zealand but not Latin America, is not particularly appropriate. More importantly, it fails to recognize that there are substantial differences among "Western" feminists, just as is true in the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup> We first turn briefly to these differences. Most feminist social scientists in the West subscribe to the "affirmative action," or "equality" view, which emphasizes that the central problem facing women is inequality. This includes occupational segregation as well as inequality before the law, labor force participation, rewards for comparable work, sharing of family responsibilities, and political representation. For the most part, they also subscribe to feminist empiricism, defined by Harding (1986) as the belief that existing social biases can be remedied by stricter adherence to rules of scientific inquiry. These views are very different from those of proponents of "feminist difference," who emphasize the uniqueness of women's experience, "women's ways of knowing" (Gilligan, 1982) and, at times, women's superiority in creating knowledge. They differ equally from "postmodernism," which is mainly associated with Jacques Derrida's (1976) efforts to deconstruct traditional understandings.

Like Nelson (1996), most feminist social scientists also reject the old duality of masculinity and femininity, particularly the positive connotations of strength and rationality of the former, and the negative attributes of weakness and lack of rationality of the latter. Instead, they "locate the positive aspect of the idea of 'de-gendering' not at the level of eliminating gender categories as a cognitive patterning device, but . . . as the assertion that gender categories are irrelevant in making judgments about whether something is good or bad, full or lacking, healthy or perverse" (*ibid.*, p. 142). Further, they share Nelson's view that many, perhaps most, of the traits assumed to be essentially male or female in a biological sense, actually have a strong cultural component. These views are not categorically distinct from those of most Czech women activists but, as we shall see, they do put far more emphasis on differences between women and men than most Western feminists do.

In the growing literature on women in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that were formerly in the Soviet orbit there has been frequent mention of the virtual absence of Western style feminism.

This is generally ascribed to deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, to what was considered forced equalization during the Soviet era, and to the rejection of feminism as just another “ism,” another ideology imposed from without, and one with leftist leanings to boot (Siklová, 1997a). It is also widely believed that because of women’s acceptance of their traditional family role, they are not only overworked but powerless. In the CR, they surely are overworked. Women’s labor force participation has declined only slightly in recent years, and the proportion of employed women who have part-time jobs is lower than in any other OECD country except Hungary. In 1998 it was 5.4 percent, compared to an OECD average of 24 (*OECD Employment Outlook*, 1999), while women continue to do by far most of the housework. On the other hand, as we shall see, the view that women in the CR are oppressed and are losing ground is clearly open to challenge.

As is true in the other CEE countries, during the Communist period, the women’s movement in the CR was controlled by the Communist party, so that most people still associate women’s groups with the old authoritarian regime. In some respects, however, the reaction after 1989 was different in each country. In Poland, for instance, the new state took on a distinctly religious character and dismantled all laws and policies that conflicted with Catholicism. In Croatia also there was renewed embrace of Catholicism. In Romania, a revulsion against the earlier brutal Ceausescu regime led to a general rejection of all government laws and regulation. In the CR (and to a lesser degree in Slovakia), however, the only CEE countries with a tradition of democracy and of bourgeois capitalism (Bryant and Mokrzycki, 1994), the main reaction was suspicion of anything political and a preoccupation with the practical affairs of every day life (Havelková, 1996).<sup>3</sup> Beyond that, the unemployment rate was extraordinarily low throughout most of the 1990s, and the CR was slower to dismantle the social safety net than other countries. We shall briefly discuss the reasons for both these facts later.

We begin by examining the relevant history of the Czech people, and recent developments in the CR, which together have shaped women’s present attitudes. While these are by no means entirely consistent with Western feminism in the usual sense, they are not consistent with traditional patriarchy either. Rather, they constitute a striking mixture of strong family values with a firm attachment to the labor market, a sense of personal efficacy, and considerable independence—best described as “feminism Czech style.” We then discuss how women’s attitudes appear to have influenced the activities and strategies of a multitude of women’s organizations as well as government policies. In the main, we conclude that Czech women’s strategy of continuing to do the lion’s share of homemaking while most of them are also employed full-time has been quite successful in maintaining the relatively high status they have long had in their society. This was, in turn, facilitated by the

government's willingness, in response to pressure from voters, to retain social programs, notably those related to employment and childcare.

### HISTORICAL ROOTS OF WOMEN'S POSITION

Beliefs and attitudes do not spring into existence full-blown. Instead, "rules, procedures, and norms from the past are likely to have a crucial bearing on current preferences and choices" (Kramer, 1997 p. 53). Therefore, we examine the historical reasons why Czech women have been more interested in furthering human rights and national goals rather than fighting specifically for women's rights. First among these was the widespread participation of women in the nineteenth century nationalist movement, when the Czech lands were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Czech feminists forged an alliance with liberal nationalists early on, who "encompassed almost the entire Czech middle class" (David, 1991, p. 27) and which fought both for women's rights and greater autonomy for Czechs.<sup>4</sup> In addition, women writers were among pioneers of the infant Czech literature, and their works became classics, widely read and generally admired. Nemcová's "Babicka" (Grandmother), published in 1855, is still arguably the most revered book written in the Czech language (Iggers, 1995). All this led to strong cohesion among women and men (Siklová, 1997b), as did women's participation in the socialist movement of the late 19th century (Havelková, 1993).

The prominent role women played in the struggle for Czech independence is in sharp contrast to many new countries that emerged as a result of wars fought by exclusively male armies. Czech women played a special role in helping the national cultural revival, especially by cultivating the language and teaching it to their children. Most likely, the strong tradition of nonviolence and striking absence of militarism (Bryant and Mokrzycki, 1994), which persist to this day, help account for women's legal equality, including the right to vote and run for political office from the beginning of the First Republic in 1918.

The virtual absence of a Czech aristocracy in the Austro-Hungarian Empire,<sup>5</sup> where the nobility played such a dominant role, helped create the egalitarian tradition that has held sway ever since. This is evidenced in the land reform carried out by the New Republic after World War I, admittedly easier because the great majority of aristocrats, whose wealth was expropriated, were Austrians and Hungarians—whose families, for the most part, were given estates by the government during the counter reformation. Peasants and legionnaires, who received the land, were Czechs and Slovaks. Additional evidence of egalitarian leanings is provided by the strength of left-leaning political parties in the First Republic and the fact that the Communist

Party gained a plurality of votes during the last democratic election before the 1948 coup, although this was also partly due to the feeling of Czechs that they had been betrayed by the West at Munich.

Acceptance of political equality for women immediately after independence in 1918 was responsible for the somewhat greater representation of women among elected officials than in most other countries during the interwar years. Women's quest for equality was further enhanced by a number of male supporters most prominent among whom was Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk,<sup>6</sup> the founder of the First Republic, president from its inception until the year before his death in 1937. Remarkably, he was a feminist even by present standards. He had married the American feminist Charlotte Garrigue, a descendant of Priscilla and John Alden, and adopted her maiden name as his middle name, a practice unheard of at the time. Together, they translated John Stuart Mill's *Essay on the Subjugation of Women* into Czech. As early as the 1880s, he supported education for women, lectured on women's issues and defended their rights.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Czech women never had to fight for their political rights as the suffragettes did elsewhere. That is not to suggest that they had achieved equality, but merely that they had achieved a status that women in other countries reached only after bitter struggles.

Women and men alike viewed the Germans and the Soviets as enemies during the long years of domination. Consequently, the struggle for human rights and national independence took precedence over that for women's rights (Havelková, 1993). True, women bore more than their share of hardships under those regimes. The National Socialists were dedicated to the traditional German view of women's place being "Küche, Kirche und Kinder."<sup>8</sup> During the Soviet years, women bore the double burden of working full-time and looking after their families, when the shortage of consumer goods and household appliances made this particularly onerous. The unfulfilled promises of "socializing housework," while women were used as the cheapest available labor force, made them increasingly cynical and reinforced their aversion to politics, both national and international (Vrabková, 1997). Under those conditions, family responsibilities provided women with an acceptable excuse not to join the Communist party.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the severe repression of all Czechs under these regimes reinforced the feeling of solidarity between women and men, much as has been true for African Americans who have struggled against racism in the United States. As Siklová (1997a, pp. 76–7) says, "most of the men working by our side were not self-confident bosses but people similarly 'downtrodden' by the overprotective party and the government. Thus men were not rivals but humble partners."

Finally, unlike women in many other countries, Czech women have had relatively little need to resist pressures from religious groups to limit

their reproductive rights. Again, the reason must be sought in history. Ever since the Czechs were defeated by the Austrians in the seventeenth century, and followers of the protestant reformer Jan Hus were subjected to the counter reformation, religion has played a relatively minor part in Czech society. Although the Catholic Church enjoyed something of a renaissance as a center of resistance to Communism, its role remains less central than in neighboring countries (including Slovakia).

Even the church takes a rather relaxed attitude toward these issues in the CR. As Heitlinger (1993, p. 102) noted "abortion [was] the most commonly used form of contraception in the Czech Republic; it is estimated that every third pregnancy is aborted." Because the government became concerned about this, it appointed a committee that included representatives of women's and church groups, medical and legal organizations, relevant ministries and of parliament. The Czech Conference of Catholic Bishops consented with others that "in a situation when there are 189,000 abortions performed annually, it would be impossible suddenly to reduce the number to zero" (Heitlinger, 1993, p. 102).<sup>10</sup> Agreement was also reached that fees for abortions should be increased substantially, but contraception would be made available at no cost. Thus, the bitter conflict over these issues, which played a large role in the creation of women's movements in such other countries as Germany, Poland, and Romania (Fuszara, 1993; Harsanyi, 1994; Tikow, 1993), was largely avoided in the CR.<sup>11</sup>

## RECENT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS<sup>12</sup>

Since the "Velvet Revolution," there has been a great diversity of opinions about the effects of the transition process on gender relations in the CR. We provide some integration by incorporating both views of Czech women, who rightly claim to have a more intimate knowledge of the situation in their country, and those of "Western feminists," who may have a broader perspective because of their greater familiarity with women's issues in the rest of the world. At the same time, we do not ignore disagreements within each of these groups. We begin by examining the main social and economic factors that have influenced the attitudes and strategies of women and men in the CR.

### Education

The relatively high level of women's schooling in the First Republic, further enhanced during the Communist era, is a source of their strength in society as well as the family, and gives women access to many professional positions. Among young people who do not go to University, girls have

more years of schooling than boys (UN, 1992), and while more boys go on to university and girls comprise fully 44 percent of university students, 55 percent of specialists with secondary education, and 36 percent of specialists with university education are women (Czech Statistical Office, 1998, Table F2.1).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, though schools are not officially segregated, girls tend to graduate from a general secondary school to a humanities-oriented gymnasium, while boys commonly attend science-oriented gymnasium or secondary schools that offer vocational training.

### **Labor Force Participation**

Although women in the Soviet bloc came to see paid work in a somewhat negative light during the Communist era, they uniformly stated that their mothers would not have wanted to stay at home had they had the chance (Heitlinger and Trnka, 1998). Also women's opposition to attempts to "send them home" during the economic reforms of the 1960s was widespread (Heitlinger, 1995). Thus, Czech women are fully aware that labor force participation enhances their economic status as well as their status in the family.<sup>14</sup> Unless a woman has a job, she generally has no income of her own, nor much opportunity for achieving status in her own right. Instead, she is economically dependent. Some women are fortunate enough to be treated well and live comfortably, but many are not. Further, employed women's double shift is less onerous now that consumer goods, household appliances and services are more readily available (Kozera, 1997). In any case, the widespread expectation that in the absence of official pressure many women would choose to stay home did not turn out to be correct.

By 1997, the labor force participation rate of men as well as women was somewhat lower than it had been before 1989,<sup>15</sup> so that women still comprised 44 percent of the total labor force. This figure is roughly comparable to those in Scandinavian countries, noted for having the largest share of economically active women among West European and North American countries (see Table 1). In addition, the great majority of women in the CR continue to work full-time. Women's share of workers between ages 45 and 49 was just above 49 percent, and as high as 47 percent among those between ages 15 and 19, even though girls stay in school somewhat longer than boys. Women's share of workers between ages 55 and 64 was considerably lower, however, because they continue to retire earlier than men.<sup>16</sup>

Because Czech men earn relatively low real wages compared to most Western men, raising the family's standard of living is one reason why so many Czech women work for pay. It is doubtful, however, that financial necessity is the whole explanation. There are many countries where men have far lower earnings, and women's labor force participation rate is nonetheless

**Table 1.** Ratio of Economically Active Men and Women, 1996

	Men	Women	Ages 15–64			
			Highest rate for women		Age 15–19	Age 60–64
			Age	Rate		
Austria	80.1	61.0	25–29	79.7	35.4	8.7
Czech Republic	80.8	64.0	40–44	91.4	22.9	14.1
Germany	79.3	61.3	45–49	77.6	26.4	11.3
Hungary	67.4	49.4	35–39	80.3	12.9	6.0
Norway	84.0	73.9	40–44	85.4	41.7	48.9
Poland	73.4	60.5	40–44	83.9	10.6	19.2
Romania	77.9	64.1	35–39	82.9	26.0	38.5
Sweden	80.0	75.6	45–49	89.9	27.4	49.8

Source: International Labour Organization, *Yearbook of Labor Statistics*, 1997, table 1A.

far lower. The unusually low unemployment rate that prevailed in the CR throughout most of the 1990s is likely to be part of the explanation (see Table 2). While in most other countries in the region queues for jobs, common in capitalist countries, had replaced queues for consumer goods, common during communist years (Offe, 1989), this was not the case in the CR before 1999. A number of factors contributed to the low unemployment rate. The phenomenally high number of tourists since the Velvet Revolution is among them. Another is that many Czechs were able to find work in Austria and Germany because they lived within commuting distance of the two countries. Notwithstanding the high unemployment rate there, Czechs found employment because they were willing to work for low wages.<sup>17</sup> Last but not least, economic reforms that rapidly increased unemployment in other CEE countries were introduced in the CR only very slowly (Kramer, 1997).

With only 4.8 percent of men unemployed in 1998, there was little pressure on Czech women to leave the labor force. Occupational segregation, substantial in the CR as in most other countries, may have been an additional reason. By 1999, the unemployment rate had risen to 8.5 percent, 7.2 percent for men, and as high as 10.1 percent for women. While

**Table 2.** Unemployment Rate, Czech Republic, 1993 to 1998

	Men	Women
1993	3.5	4.9
1994	3.5	4.6
1995	3.1	4.1
1998	4.8	7.3

Source: OECD *Quarterly Labour Force Statistics*, 1999, No. 3.

the unemployment rate leveled off below 9 percent in 2000 and by May 2001 had marginally declined to 8.1 percent (The Economist Intelligence Unit, July 2001), no country can expect to remain unscathed during the current global recession.<sup>18</sup> It remains to be seen whether women's high labor force participation rates will continue if unemployment remains high, especially since women's unemployment has been considerably higher than that of men.

Another development that may be expected to militate against lower labor force participation by women is the sharp decline in the number of children per family since the 1980s (see Chase, 1995). In addition, less tangible factors may help maintain high labor force participation of women. Both Czech women and men, for instance, generally take it for granted that contributing to household income is part of a woman's family responsibilities (Raabe, 1998). This view is radically different from the traditional notion of a woman's obligation to her husband and children in North America and many countries in Western Europe. Further, Czech women tend to attach great personal value to their jobs (Havelková, 1993), derive their identity from their own rather than their husbands' position, and many insist that they would keep their jobs even if the family did not need the money (Siklová, 1993).<sup>19</sup>

### Occupational Segregation<sup>20</sup>

As is true elsewhere, men and women in the CR are, to a considerable extent, in different occupations (see Table 3), and their jobs are at different levels within occupations. Men are more likely to be in better paid, more prestigious occupations, and in higher level and management positions, while women are more often in clerical, service, and teaching jobs. In 1997 only 24 percent of managers were women. At the same time, women comprise about 54 percent of professionals, and notably about 50 percent of physicians, and 60 percent of dentists. Overall, there has been a slightly lower level of occupational segregation in the CR (25.4) than, for instance, in the United States (27.8).<sup>21</sup>

Some recent changes are noteworthy. With increasing privatization, more men have been moving into the heavily female and increasingly important financial services sector (Crompton, 1997). Nonetheless, women still hold 66 percent of such jobs, which gives them the advantage in this increasingly important sector. Further, while women may be harmed by declining expenditures on education, they are likely to gain because of their high representation in some rapidly expanding areas: hotels and restaurants (see Ghodsee in this issue), health and social work, and "other community, social

**Table 3.** Employment by Occupation, Czech Republic 1996

	Men		Women	
	Number (thousands)	Percent	Number (thousands)	Percent
Total	2,691	100.0	2,074	100.0
Administrative and managerial workers	228	8.4	70	3.8
Professional and Technical workers	234	8.7	264	12.7
Clerical and related workers	411	15.2	481	23.2
Sales workers	70	2.6	287	13.8
Service workers	191	7.1	382	18.4
Agricultural and related workers*	56	2.1	43	2.1
Productive and related workers	835	31.0	156	7.5
Transport equipment operators	469	17.4	150	7.2
Laborers	149	5.5	239	11.5
Others	56	2.1	2	0.1

\*Agricultural, animal husbandry and forestry workers, fishermen and hunters.

Source: International Labour Organization, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*, 1997.

and personal service activities.” Finally, women are increasingly becoming entrepreneurs, albeit to a lesser extent than men and, as is true elsewhere, in smaller enterprises.

Thus, the picture is mixed. For the most part, women lag behind men in terms of their occupations and the hierarchy within occupations. At the same time, their education, skills, experience, and disproportionate representation in expanding industries enable them to make valuable contributions in the changing economy.<sup>22</sup> This, in turn, bolsters Czech women’s confidence in their status in the labor market (Cermáková, 1995b; Stastná, 1995).

### AFFIRMATION OF DUAL ROLE

The unique feature of the Czech perspective on “woman’s place” is the blend of their belief in women’s special role in the family,<sup>23</sup> with complete acceptance of their role as wage earners. This becomes obvious when we compare responses to a number of public opinion surveys in the CR with answers in other countries. On the one hand, 53 percent of Czechs agree with the traditional view that “a man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family,” compared to West European and North

American countries, where agreement ranges from 35 percent in Germany to only 11 percent in Sweden. Similarly, when asked “In terms of your family and work commitments which do you prioritize, or are they of equal value to you?” only 8 percent of men and 2 percent of women gave priority to work, 31 percent of men and 23 percent of women assigned them equal weight, but 39 percent of men and fully 69 percent of women assigned priority to family. Consistent with these views, the division of labor reported by the Czechs is the most traditional among Central and Western European countries (See Table 4)

**Table 4.** International Comparisons Division of Domestic Labor—ISSP 1994

	Always or usually the woman (%)	Man and woman about equal (%)
<i>In your household, who:</i>		
Does the laundry:		
Czech Republic	94	5
East Germany	91	8
West Germany	91	8
Hungary	90	9
Netherlands	88	10
Poland	88	10
Norway	82	15
Great Britain	81	18
Sweden	81	16
U.S.	70	26
Shops for groceries:		
Czech Republic	64	30
Netherlands	58	34
Poland	55	37
Hungary	54	38
U.S.	49	44
West Germany	48	45
Great Britain	43	53
Sweden	42	50
Norway	40	50
East Germany	34	59
Cares for a sick family member:		
Czech Republic	64	35
West Germany	56	42
Great Britain	51	48
U.S.	50	48
Poland	50	48
Netherlands	49	49
Hungary	48	51
East Germany	46	53
Norway	44	55
Sweden	42	56

Source: International Social Science Program, *Survey of Men and Women*, 1994.

On the other hand, their construction of gender is nontraditional in other respects. No less than 94 percent of Czech women agreed that their job is either very or rather important to them (Kozera, 1997) and 54 percent of Czechs (60 percent of women and 48 percent of men) strongly agree that "both the man and the woman should contribute to household income." This compares to a range from 47 percent in Hungary to 12 percent in Norway. Further, 45 percent (52 percent of women and 43 percent of men) disagreed that "being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay," while disagreement in other countries ranged from 39 percent in Norway, to only 17 percent in Hungary (Raabe, 1998).

Thus, Czech women acknowledge gender differences in primary responsibilities, but in the main do not derive their social status as wives and mothers and do not accept a subordinate position. Findings from a 1995 national survey by Phyllis Raabe and Marie Cermáková are germane here. Substantial majorities indicated opposition to subordinating their employment and earnings interests to men (Raabe, 1999). Fully 84 percent of women strongly disagreed with the statement that "Women should give up their jobs for men for a certain period of time," and 50 percent strongly disagreed with the statement that "Men should have better positions at work and make more money because they have to provide for their families."

It is thus clear that both women and men see paid work and homemaking as complementary for women. In fact, Czech women tend to take great pride in successfully combining the two (Havelková, 1993; Stastná, 1995), rather than worrying that having a job means they neglect their families, a view that is not uncommon elsewhere.

As previously noted, maintaining this dual role has considerable advantages. The substantial contribution Czech women make to household income appears to be a source of their strong position within the family and high degree of confidence in their own efficacy (Havelková, 1993).<sup>24</sup> Admittedly, women still bear a "double burden" which must be weighed against the advantages, but it is easier to combine a full-time job with family responsibilities when both the government and employers have generous "family friendly policies."

## STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

In this section we examine government policies that women favor because they expect them to make it easier to achieve their goals. We also consider strategies that both nongovernmental women's organizations and individual women have used to ensure the adoption of these policies.

### Maintaining the Safety Net

It has been widely noted that the Czechs, who eagerly embraced the return to democracy,<sup>25</sup> have been far less eager to accept a move toward a pure private enterprise system and give up the social programs they were used to. As Bryant and Mokrzycki (1994) suggest, most Czechs would like to combine the prosperity of the “West” with the security of the “East.” Thus, poverty alleviation is still considered to be the state’s responsibility, and many Czechs, particularly women, consider the “third way” preferable to either state socialism or an unrestricted market system (Vecerník, 1996). For example, in response to the 1994 International Social Science Program Survey, 84 percent of Czechs (89 percent of women and 81 percent of men) strongly agreed that “working women should receive paid maternity leave when they have a baby.” Among twenty other European countries, this level of endorsement is equaled only in Hungary. Similarly, 77 percent of Czechs (82 percent of women and 73 percent of men) strongly agreed that “families should receive financial benefits for child care when both parents work,” a higher percentage than in any of the other twenty countries surveyed (Raabe 1998).<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that this strong support, particularly by women, appears to have had considerable political impact. While their representation in the government and in the legislature is low, Czech women tend to be well informed about public affairs, and have been voting in even larger numbers than men in a country where general voter participation has been very high (Siklová, 1997b). Neither this fact nor the active support of a number of women’s organizations are likely to have escaped candidates for office.

As a result, Czechoslovakia, and later the two successor states, have not dismantled their social safety net to any great extent, and have continued to spend a larger share of GDP for these purposes than any other CEE country. Consequently such programs as subsidies for food, energy and housing have helped boost the poor’s share of income (Kramer, 1997, Vecerník, 1996). Because these programs have included extensive provisions for families, such as maternity allowances, child benefits, and subsidies for transportation, they have also made it much easier for women to combine full-time jobs with homemaking.

The fact that the economic system has been changing only slowly has been widely noted (Krovák, 1995). With the success of the Social Democratic Party in the August 2002 election, it now appears likely that gradualism may continue to prevail. Although eligibility for benefits has been tightened, and they are now for the most part income tested, inevitably those who favor a rapid conversion to unfettered private enterprise are disappointed (Kabele, 1995). Others, however, believe that giving up the traditional egalitarianism and security of the existing system would be too high a price to pay even if

it resulted in a more rapid growth rate. They have argued, with considerable success, that such a policy would lead to social disintegration and would serve to undermine support for the transition (Kramer, 1997).<sup>27</sup>

In spite of the expansive social agenda—during the second half of the 1990s transfers to households amounted to more than a third of total expenditures of the central government—the CR managed to keep its budget virtually in balance; the deficit amounted to no more than 0.1 percent of GDP in 1995, 0.1 percent in 1996, and 1.0 percent in 1997. This is a record most countries would surely envy. The deficits of local governments have been similarly modest: 0.1 percent, 0.6 percent and 0.4 percent respectively (Ministry of Finance, 1998).

In addition to programs it provides, the government also imposes requirements on employers. For instance, they have to give women 22 weeks of maternity leave, during which they are paid three-fourths of their wages. This replaced more generous support provided by the government prior to 1989. Women still have the opportunity to stay home until the child turns three while receiving about 2,000 Kc from the state (\$64 at the 1999 exchange rate, or about one-third of women's average monthly earnings in industry in 1996). This opportunity has been extended to fathers (Legge, 1997). Each parent may take seven days, and single parents thirteen days to care for a sick child. Employers may not dismiss pregnant women or mothers of children under 3 years of age, except if the business closes (OECD, 1993). This support system is thought to explain the “widely held opinion that our women are emancipated enough ‘thanks’ but no thanks to the previous regime” (Vrabková, 1997, p. 72).

### **Fair Employment and Antidiscrimination Legislation**

Just as the great popularity of policies that assist the poor and offer support for families has provided impetus for the government to continue them, so the indifference or even hostility of the population toward policies that ensure equal opportunity for women explains why it has failed to introduce more effective legislation or vigorous enforcement of existing laws. Meanwhile, long maternity and parental leaves, used almost exclusively by mothers, reinforce gender stereotypes and employers' preferences for hiring men to fill more responsible, and better paid, positions.

The Czech government did pass comprehensive labor legislation in 1991 that contains a “fair employment” clause barring discrimination against women along with many other groups. This has not, however, had much effect on prevailing practices because no government agency enforces the law. Thus job ads have continued to ask for “competent men” and “attractive

young women,” and employers feel free not to hire mothers with young children or women over the age of fifty (Heitlinger, 1993, p. 92).

Women are aware of the disparity between enjoying a full share of social benefits and suffering an inferior position as well as lower wages in the labor market.<sup>28</sup> The gender earnings gap has remained at about 32 percent since 1993, larger than in many other industrialized nations (UN, 1997). Surveys in 1991 and 1994 by Marie Cermáková showed that women as well as men believed there was equality before the law and no discrimination in social programs. On the other hand, over 85 percent thought that men had the advantage in politics in 1994,<sup>29</sup> and about 65 percent of women saw men as having an advantage in private entrepreneurial activity and employment. This is hardly surprising since in the 1991 survey, 45 percent of women reported being paid less than men doing the same job, and 62 percent reported some discrimination at their work place (Cermáková, Mariková, and Tucek, 1995; Holy, 1996). Nonetheless, there has been little agitation for government to take action concerning these issues but this may change if the recent higher rate of unemployment persists and women have greater difficulty finding jobs. Also, the process of harmonization of Czech laws and practices with European Union standards in order to gain membership may contribute to more equal opportunities and less gender discrimination.

### **The Role of Women's Organizations**

Women in the CR have largely withdrawn as active participants in the political process, with the exception of keeping up with current events<sup>30</sup> and exercising their right to vote. Perhaps as a result, there is a “reemergence of a public-spirited ethos.” This is exemplified by certain individual women but mainly by women's groups (Matynia, 1995). In fact, women comprise about 70 percent of NGO membership (Havelková, 1997). These nonhierarchical groups include humanitarian organizations concerned with victims of crime, prostitutes, and single mothers, as well as an organization of lesbian women, and the Union of Romany Women. Others are concerned with the environment, such as the Prague Mothers, although unlike the Greens in Western Europe they generally have traditional values and tend to emphasize local problems. There are also professional organizations, including the Association of Women Entrepreneurs, and some hobby and social groups. Finally, there are some political organizations, but to date they have little popular support. This is true whether they are conservative—such as the now defunct Political Party of Women and Mothers, and the umbrella organization, Christian Women<sup>31</sup>— or left-wing, such as the Clubs of Women, another umbrella organization, which brings together women from political parties with Communist antecedents (Hauser, 1995).

Even these groups are only very loosely affiliated with political parties and have their own independent platforms. Consistent with the tenor of the country, most of them place emphasis on achieving rights for people as individuals and as citizens, and are not particularly interested in women's rights, although some are concerned about the poor jobs women tend to have. As Beck (1996) notes, many women find the new market freedoms exhilarating, but they are often critical of materialism. Some are even nostalgic for traditional European chivalry toward women, and almost all are hostile toward ideologies such as feminism, for a number of reasons,<sup>31</sup> including Czech women's skepticism of its perceived leftist leanings. According to Siklová (1997b, p. 275), "We do not want to hear any criticism of the capitalist system. Their criticism of what we consider to be a solution may shake our certainty. We want to believe that the economic change (this time, into the omnipotent market economy) will solve all other problems, including the relationship between the man and woman."

Beck (1996) found that seven prominent women activists she interviewed were mostly dissatisfied with what they considered to be excessive emphasis on economic change, and not enough on political reforms or the responsibilities of the government. They thought that organizations are needed to teach people "to be autonomous citizens of a democracy," who will know how to protect their rights and how to better adjust to new economic conditions.

Siklová (1997a) attaches great importance to the new, spontaneously arisen organizations and their varied activities, from assertiveness training, management seminars, art exhibits, and theater performances, to summer camps for Romany girls, and counseling for victims of crime. In her view even though they do not have much influence and are often short-lived, they are the forerunners of the future women's movement and of feminism in post-Communist Europe.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

What have we learned from this examination of the attitudes of Czech women, their goals and the strategies they have employed to achieve them? The main explanations for the general acceptance by Czech women of their dual role appear to be that many either embrace it as "natural," prefer what they have over what men have or are, at any rate, unwilling to engage in the struggle that would be necessary to change the situation. This was certainly the case during the Communist period when far fewer women than men were willing to pay the price of joining the party in order to get a better job or achieve political power. Further, many women accept a degree of

occupational segregation and lower wages in part because, as is true in other countries, they have a stronger preference for more flexible hours than do men, because they continue to shoulder the bulk of family responsibilities.

Unlike women in many other countries, however, they are apparently not eager to run for public office or to compete with men in that arena.<sup>34</sup> This may be related to the fact that, unlike Western feminists, who are divided among themselves and often within themselves, between the equality and the difference approach (Hirsch and Fox, 1990), “Czech women tend to accept the latter. They see gender differences as embedded in nature and as resulting directly from the biological differences between men and women” (Holy, 1996, p. 175). At the same time, however, they reject any implication that women are inferior; in fact, they rather take for granted that they are not inferior and feel no need to prove it. Thus, they most happily affirm their family role as a positive dimension of their lives, and are less concerned with achieving individual success than with the welfare of their families (Siklová, 1993, 1997b). Finally, as previously discussed, they generally see men as partners most of whom, in fact, endorse “woman friendly” policies such as paid maternity leaves, financial benefits for child care, and abortion rights.

This, in a nutshell, is the strategy that we term “feminism, Czech style.” On the one hand, Czech women take pride in being both homemakers and breadwinners, and strongly identify with both these roles. They also see themselves as independent agents, efficacious in their work and family accomplishments, and as being the social equals of men, but believe that men and women are fundamentally different and that the home is primarily a woman’s domain. They pay dearly for this by working a double shift, but not by forfeiting influence on policy making, although they cede the political arena to men. It is likely that the men who run for office are aware that both a high proportion of women vote, and that most do not vote for candidates who fail to support women-friendly programs.

Although we view this as a type of feminism, most Czech women continue to reject that term. They identify feminism with the rejected policies of state socialism (Einhorn, 1993), look askance at feminist criticism of the capitalist system for it might shake their faith in what they consider to be the solution to their earlier woes, and view what they perceive to be proselytizing by Western feminists as imperialistic. Hence they contrast “imported” feminist ideology unfavorably with that of the dissidents of the 1970s and 1980s—male and female—who joined hands to defend civil rights against common oppressors (Siklová, 1997a).

These views may, however, be expected to change as the Communist past recedes, and younger women increasingly find that they have to compete with men in the labor market, all the more so if unemployment remains high. Even before 1998 only a bare majority of 51 percent of college educated

women thought that the post-1989 transition had been beneficial for them, and a substantial majority of all other women held the opposite view (Kozera, 1997). Czech women may be expected to become more politicized not only with growing unemployment, but also if environmental problems are not reduced, and certainly if the CR were to follow the practice of other countries in accelerating cutbacks in the generous social programs so highly valued by women. It is not clear, however, that such cutbacks are likely because many men also support such program. Experts like Mares and Rabusic (1994, p. 87) predict that "the future Czech welfare state will most likely keep many features of universalist social policy." Only time will tell to what extent young women who are already somewhat more sympathetic to Western-style feminism than their mothers, will move further in that direction and will, at least to some extent, change both their aims and the strategies they employ to pursue them. Should they do so, they would have the advantage of starting from a far stronger position than women in many other countries, for they already have many of the rights others had to fight for. In addition, as most observers will agree, Czech women are not in much need of assertiveness training.

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### ENDNOTES

1. Several authors emphasize historical differences among countries that were formerly in the Soviet orbit as the cause of present differences (see, for example, Funk and Mueller, 1993).
2. Alternative versions of feminism are discussed in Ferber and Nelson (1993).
3. A number of writers emphasize this. See, for instance, Scott et al., 1997.
4. Some (Evans, 1978) argue that the bargain feminists struck with nationalists imposed considerable restrictions on them. Even they, however, recognize that women also derived substantial benefits, and that they gained far more than they lost (see David, 1991).
5. After the Protestant Czechs were defeated by the Catholic Austrians in 1620, virtually all Czech nobles were expelled by the Habsburgs for their religious heterodoxy. The few who remained, along with wealthy bourgeois families, were "Germanized."
6. Among recent leaders, only Nelson Mandela has been of comparable stature.
7. Another indication that Masaryk's advocacy of the rights of the oppressed was that long before he became President he defended a poor itinerant Jew by the name of Hilsner, who was accused of ritual murder, at a time when anti-Semitism was rampant in that part of the world.

8. "Kitchen, church and children."
9. This was true to some extent elsewhere in the Soviet orbit as well (Goldfarb, 1997). However, there were often alternative avenues of escape for women, such as the Marianist cult in Poland and the "second economy" in Hungary, an opportunity not available under the rigidly Stalinist regime of post-1968 Czechoslovakia (Matynia, 1994).
10. The number of abortions has declined considerably since, presumably mainly as a result of the increased availability of contraceptives. However, the CR still had the third highest rate among fifty-five countries in the *1998 World Development Indicators*. Even so, in Czech lands, where fully 93 percent of women approved of choice (Buresová, 1997), there was grumbling because abortions were not free for poor women. In Slovakia, on the other hand, where the Catholic Church is much stronger and more traditional, there was a good deal of resistance to the accord.
11. Gal (1997) suggests that such issues as increased prostitution and violence against women are not perceived as specifically women's issues. The former is considered to be part of the problem of increased border traffic and the disparity of incomes in the CR and Germany; the latter is viewed as part of the generally higher crime rate.
12. Data for this paper cover through the third quarter of 1999. According to subsequent news stories, economic and political conditions have deteriorated further since. For instance, Bauerová reports in the *New York Times* (Dec. 4, 1999) on major demonstrations against the nominally social democratic prime minister, Miloš Zeman, and Václav Klaus, the leader of the rightist Civic Democratic party, with whom he had formed an alliance. On the other hand, the unemployment rate never rose much above nine percent, which was not out of line with other European countries, and it had begun to decline slightly by 2002. Also, in the election of fall 2002, the social democratic party won a larger plurality than before and was able to form the government once again.
13. The proportion of married women under the age of 35, who were in school, increased further between 1984 and 1993, from 2 per cent to 4 percent (Chase, 1995).
14. Numerous studies in other countries have shown that a woman's income tends to increase her influence and bargaining power within the family (e.g. Blumberg, 1988; Haddad, 1990; Hersch and Stratton, 1994; Kranichfeld, 1987; Spitze, 1986).
15. The decrease in the labor force participation rate is at least a partial result of pressures for workers to retire even earlier than was already the case in the Communist era when the usual retirement age was sixty for men and fifty-five for women. As Kramer (1997) reports, after 1989, women as young as fifty were encouraged to leave the labor force.
16. Calculations of the share of the labor force comprised by women are based on data in Table 1 of the ILO *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*, 1997. Interestingly, data provided by the Czech Statistical Office for the first quarter of 1998 show that these rates have not declined any further since 1996.
17. The extent to which workers commuted to jobs abroad is emphasized by Ham, Svejnar, and Terrell (1998). They also suggest that a large number of people who might otherwise have been unemployed may have moved into the underground economy.
18. It should also be noted that the unemployment rate has been considerably higher in some parts of the country. For instance, according to data provided by the Czech Statistical Office, during the first quarter of 1998, 10.7 percent and 10.4 percent of women were unemployed in Northern Bohemia and Northern Moravia respectively. Even for men rates were as high as 8.5 percent and 7.5 percent in those regions. On the other hand, Som and Terrell (2000) reported that at least through 1998 the Czech labor market showed an unusual degree of flexibility.
19. An explanation for this may be found in the comment of one woman who when asked whether she ever got bored while she was on maternity leave, responded "Oh yes, It's a very monotonous existence—washing, cooking, ironing, going for a walk, and then around again, and again, and again" (Legge, 1997, p. B11)
20. Data in this section are from the Czech Statistical Office, 1998a and 1998b.
21. In 1997, the index of occupational segregation was 25.4 in the CR and 27.8 in the U.S. computed from data in the International Labour Organization, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*,

- 1999, Table 2B . This index, first proposed by Duncan and Duncan (1955) is  $1/2 \sum_i |M_i - F_i|$  where  $M_i$  = the percentage of males in the labor force employed in occupation  $i$  and  $F_i$  = the percentage of females in the labor force employed in occupation  $i$ .
22. According to data in the UN *Human Development Report* (1998), as of 1995 women earned 39.0 percent of income, the 12th highest of all the countries listed.
  23. It has even been suggested that there continues to be a “cult of motherhood” and that women themselves are reluctant to give it up (Einhorn, 1993, p. 60). To the extent that the vaunted self-confidence of Czech women is greatest in the domestic sphere, that may explain why they are not necessarily eager to have men play an equal role within the family. On the other hand, it has also been suggested that they value motherhood so highly precisely because they do not stay home with their children all day (Beck, 1996). It should be noted that the birthrate is very low compared to the great majority of other countries. The crude birthrate in 1996 was 10. 4, compared to 14.8 in the U.S. (UN Statistical Yearbook, 1997). Further, Heitlinger and Trnka (1998) found that according to the young women they interviewed, the traditional allocation of family responsibilities is beginning to change, albeit very slowly. In fact, the majority expressed the view that it would be desirable for men to help out more, although they also affirmed the belief that ultimately housework is a woman’s job.
  24. Interestingly, employment is not always a guarantee of power within the family, as Harsanyi’s (1994) findings of the very low status of women in Romania shows.
  25. As noted earlier, this was indeed the only country among those formerly in the Soviet orbit that had a genuine tradition of democracy to return to. For during the First Republic, 1918–38, Czechoslovakia had a well-functioning parliamentary system. It also had a relatively advanced economy, with a per capita income equal to all but that of the wealthiest countries in Western Europe.
  26. For additional information about Czech women’s views on these issues, see also Raabe (1999).
  27. Kabele (1995, p. 75) notes that a protectionist attitude toward tenants was stalling the creation of a free housing market even in the 1990s, and that “neoliberal rhetoric and efforts to promote private enterprise have thus been accompanied by a careful consideration of the social impact of such moves related to national health, social insurance, etc.” The increased support for the Social Democrats in the 2002 election suggests that there is likely to be more popular support for an even slower rather than a more accelerated pace of change.
  28. We know that this was true during the soviet period as well, because Czechoslovakia was the one Soviet bloc country that published such data.
  29. This is consistent with the finding that only 16 percent of women thought that men kept them from entering politics. They rather believed that women had not adequately prepared themselves to become competitive in the political arena (Cermáková, 1995a, p. 77) because they acquired an aversion to politics during the Communist era, when participation in public organizations was generally “motivated by the desire to curry favor with the Communist regime rather than by aspirations to accomplish concrete things” (Heitlinger, 1996, p. 83). It has also been suggested that many Czech women believe that their interests are adequately represented by men.
  30. The extent to which Czechs do this is suggested by the fact that in 1993 newspaper circulation per 1,000 people was 583 in that country, compared to 236 in the U. S., and second only to Norway among countries for which such data are available (*UN Statistical Yearbook*, 1997).
  31. They wanted to make divorce more difficult, forbid marriage under the age 18, and limit the total number of marriages for individuals.
  32. The vicious attacks on Western feminism by the influential emigre writer Josef Skvorecky have contributed to this image.
  33. Similarly, Heitlinger (1996) expects that views toward western style feminism may become more favorable as memories of Communism fade.
  34. One reason for this may be that women themselves believe they are not ready to enter the

political arena. This interpretation is consistent with the previously mentioned survey by Cermáková (1995).

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