

From equality without democracy to democracy without equality? Women and transition in south-east Europe

Democracy without women is no democracy – Slavenka Drakulić

1. Introduction

More than ten years after the beginning of transition, the balance sheet of the transformation of communist societies and centrally-planned economies into liberal democracies and capitalist market economies is still disputed. Some scholars put the emphasis on the increase in political liberties and hail the prospects of economic growth stimulated by privatisation and restructuring, while others focus on the enormous social costs of economic restructuring. But there are some points on which most observers agree, despite their different political backgrounds. One of these is that women as a group belong to the losers in the transition, as regards their social and economic status as well as political representation. In 1994, the American sociologist Gail Kligman summarised the post-89 developments concerning women as:

A sharp drop in political participation of women in the public spheres of governance, an increasing feminization of poverty and of refugee populations, pronounced changes in reproductive policies, and a renewed emphasis on the role and responsibility of women as reproducers of cultural identity.¹

Even during the second half of the nineties when, in some transition countries, the political and economic changes have been increasingly consolidated, the plight of women has not fundamentally improved.

In this article, I trace some of the paramount aspects of increased discrimination against women caused by the process of transformation in south-east European post-communist countries (leaving Hungary and Moldavia out of the account). I relate those current developments to the communist legacy as well as to the inherent logic of capitalist restructuring. This allows us to unravel the seemingly paradoxical situation that traditional gender roles are reinforced by a process that should, allegedly, lead to a more modern society.

2. The communist legacy

The societies under consideration experienced almost half a century of communist rule. One of its defining features was the ideological commitment to create equality

1 Gail Kligman (1994): "Gendering the Postsocialist Transition: Women in Eastern Europe", *AAASS News Net*, March, p. 1.

between men and women, albeit by administrative fiat rather than a sustained change in attitudes toward gender relations.

A semblance of equity which often came closer to uniformity than genuine equality was imposed from the top down.²

Bluntly put, south-east European communist regimes understood emancipation mainly as the participation of women in paid employment. In order to achieve this goal, women had to be relieved of household responsibilities that were thought to become public ones. Employment would free women from forced marriage and dependency on men. This approach in economic policies was also reflected in the legal field, where pre-communist stipulations discriminating against women were abolished, such as the legally-determined preponderance of men in all household affairs.

The most obvious result of this commitment was an almost equal participation of women and men in the labour force and considerable progress in the educational levels of women. Even in the previously most backward south-east European country, Albania, almost half of all women were employed in 1989.³ In Bulgaria, women accounted for half of the total workforce in 1989, up from 24 per cent before World War II.⁴ These increases in employment were linked with dramatic improvements in education. Albania is, again, a good example: before the communist takeover, the majority of women were still illiterate. By 1955, illiteracy had been eradicated among all women (and men) under the age of 40 and, in the 1980s, half of Albania's university students were female.⁵ Political participation of women also increased, as communist governments pursued policies aimed at raising the number of women deputies at the local and national levels. Women's organisations in the framework of the communist political system also emerged and were supposed to be concerned with women's issues.

However, much of the progress under communism remained ambiguous and volatile, or even contradictory. Proclamations of gender equality never corresponded to social reality. Patriarchal values and structures were not eradicated, but the 'family patriarch' was replaced by the authoritarian state.⁶ The emancipation of women did not aim at enhancing women's individuality and increasing their choices, but placed women's rights and duties firmly in the public sphere of work and politics. Women were thought to be liberated in order to give them the opportunity to contribute to

2 UNICEF (1999): *Women in Transition*, Florence: UNICEF (The MONEE Project: Regional Monitoring Report, No. 6), p. iii.

3 Fatos Tarifa (1998): "Disappearing from Politics (Albania)", in Marilyn Rueschemeyer (ed.): *Women in the Politics of Postcommunist Eastern Europe*, Armonk, NY and London: M. E. Sharp, p. 269.

4 Dobrinka Kostova (1998): "Women in Postcommunist Bulgaria", in Rueschemeyer (1998), op. cit., p. 251.

5 Tarifa (1998), op. cit., p. 269ff.

6 Eva Kreisky (ed.) (1996): *Vom Patriarchalen Staatssozialismus zur Patriarchalen Demokratie*, Wien: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, p. 11.

building socialism, implying emancipation was not an end in itself, but an instrument for wider political goals, as defined by the party. Aside of this, the commitment to bring women into formal employment also stemmed from the increased demand for labour due to rapid industrialisation and bureaucratisation.

However, women were not only praised as workers, but also as mothers. From the 1960s, governments in Romania and Bulgaria were putting increasing emphasis on the 'foremost and natural' role of women; that is, to give birth to children, due to concerns over declining birthrates. Women were thus burdened with the 'duty' of enlarging the socialist nation. In the case of Romania, pro-natalist policies became extremely repressive and caused much psychological and physiological damage to women.⁷

In some respects, communist gender-policies even laid the ground for future discrimination against women after the break down of communism. Probably the most obvious failure was that the private domain remained virtually untouched, despite the increased significance of women in public. Nearly all women worked outside the home, and had families at the same time, so most of them had to carry the 'double burden' of homework and employment. This double burden was aggravated by the common scarcity of goods, and also the insufficiency of public facilities for childcare. It was generally assumed that women would have primary responsibility for providing the household with necessary goods, including childcare. Therefore, women had to bear a greater total workload than men; data from Yugoslavia (1965) and Bulgaria (1988) suggest that the total workload of women averaged 60 to 70 hours per week, of which 20 to 30 hours were unpaid work. In Italy, for example, a country with a total workload for women well above the west European average – in particular as regards unpaid work – women had to work about 56 hours in 1980; in West Germany and the UK, the weekly workload of women amounted to around 54 in the 1960s.⁸

The division of labour also retained a gendered character, although women were to be found in traditionally 'male' occupations such as bricklayer or driver. However, most women were active in specific sectors, such as education, healthcare, social welfare, and the textile and shoe industries, etc. These jobs were graded lower in prestige and social status, and – more importantly – they were to be particularly affected by the transition. Aside of this, few women held managerial and leadership positions in industry and the professions.

Also, politically, the emancipation of women was superficial rather than genuine. In nearly all the countries of south-east Europe, few women advanced beyond mid-level positions. They accounted for from one-fifth to one-third of the members of parliaments, but very few women were to be found in the Central Committees and Politburos where real political power was wielded. Aside of this, representatives in parlia-

7 For the case of Romania see the excellent study of Gail Kligman (1998): *The Politics of Duplicity. Controlling Reproduction in Ceauşescu's Romania*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: California University Press.

8 UNICEF (1999), op. cit., p. 25.

ments were appointed and not genuinely elected, and had no power. High rates of female participation in 'elected' bodies were, therefore, cosmetic:

The ideological promise of gender equality under communism went unfulfilled.⁹

In some cases, the proportion of women in the Central Committee of the respective communist party, where real decisions were taken, even declined. In Romania, for example, during the 1950s the proportion of women in parliament rose to 17 per cent, whereas in the Central Committee it declined from 7 to 4 per cent.¹⁰ In Romania, as elsewhere, women also tended to cluster at the bottom of any hierarchy.

In the case of Romania, the particular promotion of women in powerful organs of party and state during the 1970s and 1980s backfired after the end of communism, because it was to become associated with the hated couple of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu (the "Elena-Ceaușescu-Syndrome" as one scholar called it¹¹). But emancipation and, in particular, feminism, became contaminated concepts also in other post-communist countries. Besides, many women had been promoted against their will, which had added another 'burden' to their already burdened life. They saw transition also as a chance to retreat to private life and as an opportunity for individual choice.

Concluding, women were in a weak situation to face the dramatic changes caused by the dissolution of communist rule, because they lacked political as well as social and economic resources to defend or improve their position.

3. The 'domestication' of women after 1989

Many indicators point to the deterioration in the social, political and health status of women in south-east Europe, as well as in the other European post-socialist transition countries after 1989. This is also true for men in several regards, but women have, nevertheless, been confronted with specific challenges. The general feature is that women have been rather the objects than the agents of change, which is linked to the pressure on women throughout the region to retreat from public life. This process, which I want to call 'domestication', has political, social and economic consequences which will be dealt with in the sections below. It is, moreover, enhanced by deliberate policies to re-define the role of women and force them again to play traditional roles.

3.1. Political representation

One of the most striking changes brought about by the transition was the dramatic decline in female representation in elected assemblies. Quotas for women were abolished and many fewer women were placed on party lists for elections. A high percent-

9 *ibid.*, p. 93.

10 Mary Ellen Fischer (1998): "From Tradition and Ideology to Elections and Competition. The Changing Status of Women in Romanian Politics", in Rueschemeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 172.)

11 Ute Gabanyi (1998): "Rumäniens Frauen nach der Wende: Fortschritt, Gleichschritt, Rückschritt?", *Südosteuropa*, Vol. 47, No. 5-6.

age of female representatives is not, of course, tantamount to women-friendly policies, as the communist example proved. And women in powerful positions need not automatically pursue feminist issues. However, the experience, especially of the Nordic countries, shows that women's priorities and concerns are more likely to be addressed if women make up a sizeable proportion (a 'critical mass') of decision-making bodies. The virtual absence of women from elected bodies in south-east Europe therefore points to the contrary.

The token representation of women in communist parliaments came to an end immediately after the *Wende* (see also Table 1: Percentage of women in politics). In Croatia, only three women were among the 80 delegates in the first multiparty *Sobor*, while the last communist *Sobor* had been made up of 16 per cent female representatives. After 1990, the proportion slightly rose although without passing the 10 per cent threshold.¹² In another particularly nationalist country, Serbia, only 1.6 per cent of all members of parliament were women between 1990 and 1993.¹³ In Slovenia, only 10 per cent of delegates in the first multi-party parliament were women.¹⁴ Only five women made it into the first multi-party parliament in Macedonia, which had 120 deputies. Four women were elected to the Macedonian parliament and nine in 1998.¹⁵ In Romania, the first multi-party parliament had 13 women out of a total of 383 delegates; in the upper chamber, the Senat, one woman faced 116 men.¹⁶ Six years later, the percentage of women has doubled in both chambers, but is still far below the pre-1989 level. In Bulgaria, women accounted for only 8.8 per cent of all delegates to the "Great National Assembly", elected in 1990 in order to pass a new Constitution, whereas their proportion had been 21 per cent in the last communist assembly. Thereafter, the figure rose only slightly to nine per cent in 1997.¹⁷ In Albania, the percentage of female delegates dropped from 29.2 per cent in the last communist parliament to 3.6 per cent in 1991, and 2.8 per cent one year later.¹⁸ Since then, the increase in female representation has been all but impressive. The only country with a sort of gender quota is Bosnia-Herzegovina, where provisions to promote female participation in parliament were introduced in 1998. As a result, the share of women in the Federation's parliament rose from 2 per cent in 1996 to 26 per cent in 1998.¹⁹

12 Jill Irvine (1998): "Public Opinion and the Political Position of Women in Croatia", in Rueschemeyer (1998), op. cit., p. 215.

13 Žarana Papić (1999): "Women in Serbia: Post-Communism, War and Nationalist Mutations", in Sabrina P. Ramet (ed.): *Gender politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 164.

14 Silva Mežnarić and Mirjana Ule (1998): "The Case of Slovenia", in Rueschemeyer (1998), op. cit., p. 203.

15 UNDP Macedonia: *The Status of Women in Macedonia*, at: <http://www.undp.org.mk/womenin.htm>, p. 11.

16 Gabanyi (1998), op. cit., p. 254.

17 Kostova (1998), op. cit., p. 256.

18 Tarifa (1998), op. cit., p. 282.

Table 1: Percentage of women in politics

Country	First multi-party parliament	Parliament	Cabinet	Vice-ministers	Municipal Councils
		as of February 1999	as of June 1998		
Albania	3.6	11.0	5.0	5.0	1.0
Bulgaria	8.8	10.8	18.0	24.0	25.0
Bosnia-Herzegovina	–	6.9	0.0 ^a	4.6 ^c	6.2
Croatia	3.75	7.2	0.5	20.0	–
Rep. of Macedonia	4.2	7.5	10.0	18.2	–
Romania	3.4	5.6	0.0 ^a	4.1 ^c	–
Serbia (as part of FRY)	1.6	4.0	5.9 ^b	8.7 ^{bc}	–
Slovenia	10.0	7.8	9.1 ^a	36.8	10.8

Notes: ^a 1996 ^b FR Yugoslavia ^c Refers to sub-ministerial level

Sources: Kostova (1998), p. 256; Tarifa (1998), p. 282; Gabanyi (1998), p. 254; Mežnarić & Ule (1998), p. 203; Irvine (1998), p. 215; Papić (1999), p. 164; UNDP (1999a), p. 66; UNDP (1999b), pp. 142-143.

Women are also under-represented at the regional and local levels, although women face fewer problems in entering local as opposed to national politics. However, only a few mayors are women; around 10 per cent in Bulgaria and 2 per cent in Romania. In Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republic of Macedonia there are no women mayors at all. In Bulgaria, women amounted to 21 per cent of delegates on local councils in 1995, while in Romania the figure was just six per cent, which points also to significant differences between the countries of the region.²⁰ Five women face 20 men in Skopje's city council, and the share of women among local municipal councillors is around six per cent in Macedonia.²¹

The low level of political representation further enhances the neglect of women's issues by most parties. Parties on their own discriminate against women, as their representation on party executive committees is invariably less than their share of the membership. In Slovenia, for example, women constitute 60 per cent of the membership of the Christian Democrats, but less than 20 per cent of the leadership positions.²² The share of women in non-elected high government posts is also very low. Women as ministers are still rare (see Table 1: Percentage of women in politics). In

19 UNDP Bosnia and Herzegovina (1999): *Human Development Report 1998*, Sarajevo: UNDP, at: <http://www.undp.com.ba/hdr/engleski/pdf/hdr-eng.pdf>, p. 99.

20 UNICEF (1999), op. cit., p. 101.

21 UNDP Macedonia, op. cit., p. 13.

22 UNICEF (1999), op. cit., p. 96.

1996, only 13.2 per cent of senior government posts were occupied by women in the countries of the Former Yugoslavia, as were just 9.9 per cent of such posts in the rest of the region.²³ Evidence from Macedonia also points to a very low representation of women in higher levels of the judiciary, such as supreme courts.²⁴

The political under-representation of women is caused by several factors: first of all, most parties share a distaste for active emancipation policies, and gender equality is not regarded as important for the legitimisation of the new liberal-democratic regimes – and, of course, even less so as far as nationalist regimes are concerned. Quotas for women concerning political representation are generally shunned because they are associated with the communist past. Aside of this, women entered the realm of post-communist politics with less resources for the political struggle. Political networks of ex-communists, as well as of former dissidents, consisted mainly of men. In many cases, male-dominated party leaderships also believed that female candidates would diminish the odds of their party in elections, although evidence from Macedonia points to the fact that voters do not have gender-based preferences concerning candidates.²⁵ Women, therefore, seem more likely to organise themselves outside political parties in various NGOs. The NGO sector is, in turn, becoming more and more interested in activities which aim at the larger involvement of women in politics and society, and at solving their immediate problems.

The reluctance of women to involve themselves in politics also results from the experience of communist promotion and its adverse affects. Economic constraints, reduced social security and the pressure to carry out the time-consuming tasks of home-making and childcare do not leave many women enough time to engage themselves in politics. Finally, many men, but also women, simply believe that a woman's place is in the kitchen rather than in the parliament.

3.2. Employment

The change in the economic situation of women must be seen against the background of the general decline in economic output during the transition. GDP dropped by 35 per cent and more during the first half of the 1990s, and has recovered its 1989 level only in Slovenia. In all other countries, GDP is still substantially lower than in 1989. The decline in GDP has been accompanied by the loss of millions of jobs, leading to high unemployment. Many unemployed people have found work in the growing shadow economy, but these unregistered jobs do not entitle their holders either to social security benefits or to the protection of the labour laws. As a result of the decline in economic activity and formal employment, revenues of governments have also been reduced, diminishing their possibilities to intervene in the social and economic fabric. Most of the efforts of the former communist regimes to support female employment were linked to generous social security benefits, rights of return after mater-

23 *ibid.*, p. 97.

24 UNDP Macedonia, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

25 *ibid.*, p. 16.

nity leave and public facilities for childcare, and so the reduction in public expenditure must have had adverse effects on the economic situation of women.

The decline in women's economic status is best illustrated by the reduction in female employment. In several countries, women were more likely to become unemployed and had more difficulties in finding new jobs (see the examples of Bulgaria in Table 2 and Romania in Table 3). In Romania, 13.5 per cent of women and 9.1 per cent of men were unemployed in 1994.²⁶ In the Republic of Macedonia, women amounted in 1997 to 38 per cent of all employees, but 45.1 per cent of those who were unemployed.²⁷ The unemployment rates of women were not higher than those of men in all countries, but this can partly be explained by the official unemployment statistics counting only those who register as such. Those – mostly women – who completely withdraw from the labour market are not officially regarded as 'unemployed'. The gender gap in crude activity rates (that is male minus female rates) has, thus, risen throughout the region.²⁸ In particular, women raising small children, as well as older women, have problems in the more competitive labour market.

Table 2: Unemployment in Bulgaria by gender

	Men	Women
Total unemployment (in thousands)		
1991	191	228
1992	275	302
1993	298	328
1994	223	265
1995	188	236
1996	215	263
1997	236	287
By duration (1995, in percentages)		
Under one year	35.8	31.6
One year or more	63.4	68.0
By age (1995, in percentages)		
Up to 29	40.4	39.2
30-54	46.1	51.1
Rate of employment (November 1997, in percentages)		
Economically active	56.7	46.8
Employed	48.4	39.7
Unemployed	14.7	15.3

26 Gabanyi (1998), op. cit., p. 239.

27 UNDP Macedonia, op. cit., pp. 26, 28.

28 UNICEF (1999), op. cit., p. 25.

Source: *Transitions* (1995), Vol. 5, No. 1, January, p. 15; *Statističeski godišnik na Republika Bălgarija* (1998), Sofia: NSI, p. 81.

Table 3: Female/male comparisons in post-communist Romania

	Females as percentage of males
Life expectancy at birth, 1992-1994	111
Mean years of schooling, 1995	88
Secondary enrolment, 1994-95	102
Post-secondary enrolment	93
Employment, 1994	87
Unemployment, 1995	123

Source: UNDP Romania (1996), p. 101.

Minority women – especially from the large Roma minorities, but also Muslim women in non-Muslim countries – face particular problems in finding employment. They are also often discouraged to seek such by their own communities, which pursue strong patriarchal values.

Poverty and unemployment have forced many women to the very margins of society, where tens of thousands of the most desperate end up in prostitution. Young women are especially vulnerable, and are often forced into prostitution and sold into virtual slavery in west European brothels.

Aside of falling rates of employment, women are also faced with gender gaps in pay as a result of gender-based occupational segregation. As in most countries around the globe, women are clustered in lower-paying, lower-status occupations and are not equally represented in senior and decision-making positions (see the example of Croatia in Table 4). The economic sectors in which women have predominated under communism are still characterised by state-run enterprises, for example public health, education, science, and information and culture. In the Republic of Macedonia, for example, two-fifths of all female employment is in health care, education and public administration.²⁹ In these sectors, salaries are lower than in others and are often delayed, or there have been large staff reductions and budget cuts due to austerity policies.³⁰ In general, the rate of movement of women from public sector to private sector jobs has been slower than that of men.³¹ Aside from this, many women are employed in low-qualified, export-oriented industrial occupations such as the textile industry and shoe making,³² in which many jobs have been cut due to restructuring, privatisation and shrinking export opportunities.

29 *ibid.*, p. 30.

30 UNDP (1999a): *Transition 1999. Human Development Report for Europe and the CIS*. New York: UNDP, p. 70.

31 UNICEF (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 31.

32 Johanna Deimel (1995): “Die Stellung der Frau in Bulgarien”, *Südosteuropa*, Vol. 44, No. 3-4, p. 152.

Table 4: The composition of employees according to occupation and sex in Croatia (June 1997)

Occupation	Percentage of women in relation to men	Percentage of all women in each occupation
Heads of government bodies and managers	28.9	0.9
Experts and scientists	48.8	10.3
Engineers and technicians	52.3	15.3
Office and desk clerks	69.6	20.7
Services and sales	61.6	18.6
Agriculture and related	71.0	12.4
Craft occupations and individual manufacture	17.0	6.5
Operators of machines, vehicles etc.	26.7	4.0
Low-skilled occupations	55.0	10.7
All occupations	49.6	100.0

Source: UNDP (1999a), p. 71.

As a result of these processes, the gender gap in pay has risen throughout the region, albeit not dramatically, and it is still comparable, or even smaller, than in western countries. In Slovenia, for example, female monthly wages amounted to 87.0 per cent of male ones in 1987, and 85.4 per cent in 1996. In Bulgaria, a drop from 74.0 to 69.1 per cent was recorded in the ratio of female to male wages between 1990 and 1997.³³

Women's loss of formal employment has occurred despite their educational achievements being comparable to, or even better than, those of men. In Macedonia, for instance, 51.6 per cent of all university students are women.³⁴ But women appear to be particularly vulnerable to the macroeconomic and social changes brought about by transition. They have, for example, to face the consequences of the erosion of social services much more than do men. Many women are forced to concentrate on the upbringing of their children, as state- and enterprise-run childcare facilities either become too expensive or are closed down. In particular, nurseries for children under two or three years have been closed and, as a consequence, enrolment rates have declined.³⁵ Rights of return after maternity leave have in many cases become illusory, as the state lacks the capability to impose them on private employers. Part-time employment, which would allow women to balance their roles as care-givers and breadwin-

33 UNICEF (1999), op. cit., p. 33.

34 UNDP Macedonia, op. cit., p. 9.

35 UNICEF (1999), op. cit., p. 55.

ners, is still rather uncommon in the region. Moreover, wages are generally so meagre that part-time work is often not a viable alternative. Early marriages of women and early childbirths also interrupt their formal education and withdraw them from the broader process of decision-making in society.³⁶

Many women, therefore, lose important job experience and are not treated by employers as equal to men. An ILO survey in Bulgaria during 1991-93 found out that employers usually select men and pay them a higher salary.³⁷ Private enterprises also regard women as potentially more expensive labour because of maternity leave and their right to return, while they are looking for the cheapest available labour in order to maximise profits. Women are thus less likely to be private-sector employees. However, they are also less likely to be self-employed or entrepreneurs. In the FR Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Romania, the share of women among entrepreneurs amounted to 23-26 per cent in 1997,³⁸ although this is, however, consistent with their share in western market economies. The biggest problem for women in starting up their own businesses is the lack of access to credit and, closely related to that, the lack of 'symbolic' capital in the sense of informal networks, contacts and patrons. Against all the odds, women do try to establish themselves in private business and, in particular, the thriving NGO sector provides many career opportunities for women. But these women, as are many others who are employees, face an increased 'double' or 'triple' burden because they have to spend much time on household tasks, a problem aggravated by the lack of mechanisation and automatisations of homemaking.³⁹

3.3. Values and Roles

However, women's loss of political and economic status is not only an unavoidable by-product of transition, but also the result of the deliberate choices which have to be made despite all the economic constraints. These choices reflect to a large extent existing power relations between the genders in politics, as well as notions about the roles of men and women in society.

South-east Europe is regarded as a region in which patriarchal values have traditionally been dominant and which were not completely eradicated by communism. Apparently, the transition crisis, which has resulted in a loss of security in many walks of life, has led to a strengthening of old role models and values. The breakdown of communism is frequently associated with a moral vacuum and crisis. To overcome this crisis and to achieve a healthy society, many – especially on the right – argue that family and other traditional values must be strengthened, assigning men to the public life of work and politics, and women to the private life of housework and motherhood.⁴⁰ Fem-

36 UNDP Macedonia, op. cit., p. 4.

37 UNDP (1999a), op. cit., p. 70.

38 UNICEF (1999), op. cit., p. 103.

39 UNDP (1999a), op. cit., p. 72ff.

40 Wendy Bracewell (1996): "Women in the Transition to Democracy in South-Eastern Europe", in Mient Jan Faber (ed.): *The Balkans. A Religious Backyard of Europe*, Ravenna: Longo Editore, p. 217.

inist movements are claimed to be 'immoral', or traitors to the nation, including in Slovenia and, particularly, in Croatia and Serbia, where conservative governments after 1990 have waged campaigns against feminist activists.⁴¹ In Slovenia and Croatia, the Catholic church has also put pressure on women to return to traditional family norms. In both countries, the church has pushed for the abolition of abortion, albeit without much success because the populations have been against such restrictions. In Slovenia, the anti-abortion struggle of the church, and the conflicts over 'reproductive rights', unwittingly contributed to a rise in female political activism.⁴² In the mainly Orthodox countries of south-east Europe, the church has had less influence on public matters, although it has also tried to facilitate traditional role models.

There are opposing forces, such as reformed communists, social democrats and liberals, which, to some extent, emphasise gender equality. But, due to poor female political representation, neither do political groups regard women's issues as paramount ones.

The severest cultural backlash has occurred in countries ruled by nationalist regimes in which:

Genders are divided as *naturalized* sexes in order to make them complementary agents of the Nation.⁴³

In nationalist discourse and politics, women are mainly defined by their role in the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation, and become 'mothers of the nation'. Women are not seen as individuals in their own right, but as instruments for the higher ideals of the national collective, quite similar to the discourse in socialism. This notion was particularly dominant in war-afflicted countries for, in war, women:

Can only be a wife of the dead hero, or a mother of the dead hero, or a daughter of the dead hero.⁴⁴

Nationalist movements aim at controlling women's sexuality in order to enlarge the nation. In Croatia, the church's campaign against abortion was supported by the government because, "The ruling party [was attempting] to increase the Croat population".⁴⁵ In Slovenia, the platform of the DEMOS coalition stated in 1991 that, "Women should not have the right to abort future defenders of the nation".⁴⁶ The Serbian patriarch, in turn, demanded that the government fight what he called the "White

41 Tatjana Pavlović (1999): "Women in Croatia: Feminists, Nationalists and Homosexuals", in Ramet (1999), op. cit., p. 136; Branka Andjelković (1998): "Reflections on Nationalism and Its Impact on Women in Serbia", in Rueschemeyer (1998), op. cit., pp. 235-248.

42 Pavlović (1999), op. cit., p. 131; Irvine (1998), op. cit., p. 224; Mežnarić & Ule (1998), op. cit., p. 210; Vlasta Jalušić (1999): "Women in Post-Socialist Slovenia: Socially Adapted, Politically Marginalized", in Ramet (1999), op. cit., p. 117ff.

43 Papić (1999), op. cit., p. 159.

44 Pavlović (1999), op. cit., p. 142.

45 Irvine (1998), op. cit., p. 224.

46 Quoted in Bracewell (1996), op. cit., p. 215.

Plague”, i.e. declining birth rates. Serbian women were also urged to enter into a “fertility war” against Albanian women, whose fertility was considerably higher.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the Serbian regime tried to curtail birth rates among Albanians by repressive administrative measures.

3.4. Violence, Health and Reproduction

Male attempts to control female sexuality are also reflected in an upsurge of violence against women. In the Yugoslav wars, women were particularly affected by violence. Mass rape was a deliberate part of warfare in the Bosnian war during 1992-1995, when an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 women, representing 1-2 per cent of the total pre-war female population, were raped.⁴⁸ The proportion of female civilian casualties, as well as of women refugees, was also very high. Including the Kosovo conflict, it has been estimated that women and children account for eight out of ten civilians caught up in the post-Yugoslav wars.⁴⁹

However, violence against women has also increased in countries not affected by war. Most of this violence is domestic and thus often goes unreported. Credible statistical data is therefore hard to grasp, but surveys based on interviews and questionnaires can partly fill the gap. According to a study of the SOS Helpline for Battered Women and Children in Belgrade, one woman in seven is the victim of rape. In Albania, a survey in 1995 had 63 per cent of the 850 women interviewed reporting physical or psychological violence. In Romania, 29 per cent of women treated between March 1993 and March 1994 in the Bucharest Forensic Hospital had been beaten by their partner.⁵⁰

In most countries, national legislation has not yet tackled the problem of domestic violence, which is usually regarded as a private matter that need not be addressed by public policies. In Bulgaria, for example, domestic violence against women is not specifically prohibited. Similarly, the Macedonian penal code outlaws violence against women (and men), but does not specifically deal with domestic and marital, as well as other forms of violence, against women.⁵¹ Marital rape is not recognised as a crime in Albania, Croatia, Republic of Macedonia, Romania and FR Yugoslavia.

In Slovenia, domestic physical violence is not considered criminal in cases of ‘light’ injury – a definition that includes ‘fractured noses, ribs, light contusions and punched-out teeth’.⁵²

Much of domestic violence stems from the unstable economic and social situation, from rising unemployment, poverty, social exclusion and alcohol misuse. It has become more difficult for women to separate from violent partners due to their financial

47 Papić (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 163.

48 UNICEF (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 85; Dorothy Q. Thomas and Regan E. Ralph (1999): “Rape in War: The Case of Bosnia”, in Ramet (1999), *op. cit.*, pp. 203-218.

49 UNICEF (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 86.

50 *ibid.*, p. 84.

51 UNDP Macedonia, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

52 UNICEF (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 89.

dependency. Homes for battered women are also scarce throughout the region and the legal process is often inaccessible for victims of violence due to its high costs. However, there are also efforts to approach this problem, like the *Programme against Violence* of the Bulgarian Women's Union, which opened the first-ever shelter for battered women and their children in Bulgaria, or SOS hotlines for women who have been victimised by men in some cities across the region.

Apart from the psychological and physiological consequences of violence, women's health has also deteriorated in other regards. The transition has weakened the state health system and has caused adverse changes in the socio-economic factors that shape women's health, such as income disparity, greater social stress and poverty. The health record is uneven, within the region as well as by different indicators. For example, the life expectancy of men and women has grown in some countries; in others (Albania and Bulgaria) it has declined for both; while in others (Romania) it has risen among women but declined among men.⁵³ Maternal mortality rates have also declined between 1989 and 1997 throughout the region (except in Slovenia and Bulgaria), but in Romania, Albania and Bulgaria they are still above the WHO target for Europe of 15 deaths per 100,000 live births.⁵⁴ In Romania and Albania, the decline in maternal deaths was mostly a result of the legalisation of abortion. Before 1989 in both countries, many pregnant women not wishing to give birth resorted to illegal abortions carried out in unhygienic circumstances which resulted in increased rates of maternal deaths.

Other aspects of reproductive health, such as pregnancy and birth complications, have, however, been displaying negative trends since 1989, in particular in the countries worst hit by the transition (in fact in all of south-east Europe except for Slovenia and, to some extent also, Croatia). The evidence indicates a decline in the provision of health services for pregnant women, and also substantial inequalities in access to pre- and post-natal care by age, education, income and place of residence (rural or urban). Economic despair, inadequate access to family planning and contraceptives, as well as the lack of sex education, has also led to high abortion rates which, in the first half of the 1990s, were sharply rising in Bulgaria, Romania and Albania, where abortion had been forbidden or restricted before 1989. In Romania, six times more abortions were reported in 1990 than in 1989.

However, since the mid-1990s, abortion rates have been declining in these countries, and have also been falling in the countries of former Yugoslavia since 1989 (see Table 5).⁵⁵ Abortion is often followed by complications, aside of the psychological damage. The high rates of abortion have strengthened the process of falling fertility rates which can be observed throughout the region. In the countries of former Yugoslavia, the total fertility rate decreased by 10 per cent from 1989 to 1997; in the rest of south-east Europe, which includes Albania with its traditionally high birth rates, it

53 *ibid.*, p. 12.

54 *ibid.*, p. 60.

55 *ibid.*, p. 63.

dropped by 41 per cent. Bulgaria, with well under 8 live births per 1,000 inhabitants, has now one of the lowest birth rates in Europe (see Table 5).

Table 5: Birth-rates and abortions, 1998

Country	Birth-rate		Abortion	
	per 1000 persons	1989 = 100	Per 100 life births	1989 = 100
Albania	18.1	73.9	31.5	106.4
Bosnia-Herzegovina	10 ^a	66.8 ^a	n.a.	n.a.
Bulgaria	7.9	62.8	114.8	97.7
Croatia	10.1	86.4	18.9	22.4 ^c
FR Yugoslavia	12.4 ^a	83.9 ^a	61.1 ^b	46.8 ^b
FYR Macedonia	14.6	85.6	41.1	48.5
Romania	10.5	66	114.4	219.6
Slovenia	9	76.7	51	75.4

Notes: ^a 1997 ^b 1996 ^c 1990 = 100

Source: transMONEE 2000 database

Aside from problems related to pregnancy, lifestyle-related health risks have also grown. This is related to economic problems, such as lack of medicines and low nutrition levels, as well as to changes in behaviour, especially in young women who are increasingly bridging the gulf with men as regards drinking and smoking.

4. Conclusion

Insufficient attention has been paid to women's issues by political parties and governments in the post-communist countries of south-east Europe although, during the most recent years, a gradual change toward greater assertiveness for specifically female problems has been noticeable, in particular in countries negotiating membership with the European Union. South-east European 'traditional' values, as well as the communist legacies, explain much of the current plight of women. However, as similar processes in central European transition countries prove, the overall development of women's status is more determined by the very logic of restructuring toward capitalist market economies, regardless of geographic or cultural particularities. Unpaid female work in the spheres of biological and social reproduction is historically one of the pillars of capitalism. Consciously or not, the advocates of economic liberalism facilitate the re-emergence of traditional role models, because they are opposed to regulation and intervention by the state in the economic fabric. The dismantling of the welfare state affects women more than men, as governments terminate or seriously reduce the social benefits that have been intended to bring women into employment. Without such support, employment for women often becomes illusory.

Hence the neo-liberal paradigm, which is also opposed to the deliberate promotion of female political representation, must be abandoned in order to alleviate the plight of women. Women's issues have to be seriously considered in public discourse. That, however, will only be the case if more women participate in decision-making, which requires some sort of quota systems enhancing the representation of women within the highest law-giving institution.⁵⁶ Men's resistance, as well as women's reluctance to get involved in politics, must, therefore, be overcome. Civil society and the NGO sector, from which, until now, most successful responses against gender inequality have come, cannot fundamentally change the situation on their own. State efforts, such as affirmative action and specific programmes, are required, and these need to address the political, economic, social and educational problems. Micro-credit programmes might also prove to be very useful in the support of female business activities.

However, the situation in south-east Europe must be put into a comparative perspective in order to understand the structural patterns of discrimination against women. According to several indicators, the situation of women in south-east Europe now more resembles that of other developed countries than it did before 1989, for example as regards the increased differences in the rates of male and female employment, which is now similar to the levels of western economies (except for the Nordic countries). Pay gaps between men and women are also not particularly different in south-east Europe from those in western Europe. As regards political representation, women in many EU countries are not less under-represented: in France, Italy, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Portugal and Greece, women were holding well below 15 per cent of parliament seats as of February, 1999.⁵⁷ Thus, the transition countries can be said to come closer to capitalist 'normality'.

Discrepancies in women's political, economic, health and social status between south-east Europe and western countries can mainly be explained by the dramatic economic constraints with which south-east European societies are confronted, and also by a certain level of 'backwardness' as regards technology and legislation. But, in addition, there are still positive aspects of the communist legacy at hand, which indicates that the post-communist transition countries do enjoy a gender equality advantage relative to other countries with a similar level of economic development. They rank, therefore, better in the "Gender-Related Development Index" than in the "Human Development Index". This, as well as progress in legal and formal gender equality, which is already under way, might well serve as starting points for changes also in the real relationships between the genders toward emancipation and gender equality.

56 See: UNDP Macedonia, op. cit., p. 34.

57 UNDP (1999b): *Human Development Report*, New York: UNDP, p. 142.

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