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Gender and Post-socialist Welfare States in Central Eastern Europe: Family Policy Reforms in Poland and the Czech Republic Compared

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I. Introduction

Since 1989, post-socialist¹ Central and Eastern European countries have significantly reformed their social policies and social security systems. One of the key challenges in so doing was balancing the tension between a tradition of - and in some countries continued commitment to - extensive welfare provisioning and substantive income redistribution through the state on the one hand, and the residualist social policy set-up advocated by the currently dominant global neoliberal economic framework on the other. Among the multiple challenges faced during the reform process, abolishing gender inequality was given little, if any, priority. Nevertheless, the reforms have had important gender implications.

Both Poland and the Czech Republic faced the “competing demands of building capitalism and democracy” at the beginning of the 1990s (Orenstein 2001: 6). Yet both countries responded somewhat differently: Poland chose a rapid and radical economic transformation strategy - “shock therapy”. In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, a mix of neoliberal and social democratic elements of reforms was combined into a “social liberal strategy of reform” (Orenstein 2001: 7).

Both countries also followed different reform paths in the field of social policy. During the 1990s Poland moved further than other post-socialist countries in the direction of a residualist and familial model of a welfare state, scaling down state involvement in the provision of social protection, and promoting individual responsibility and - de-facto, if not always explicitly - greater reliance on the family for the provision of wellbeing.²

Reforms in the Czech Republic also revoked important elements of the inherited universalist tradition of welfare-state provisioning. On the whole, however, Czech legislative discourses on social policy continued to refer more explicitly to social solidarity. A higher level of state involvement as well as a greater commitment to state-sponsored income redistribution was maintained.

¹ The terms “real-existing socialism”, “real socialism” and “state socialism” are used here interchangeably, to distinguish the Central and Eastern European regimes from the ideals of socialism as formulated by theorists like Marx. See True 2003: 181, quoting Cox 1991. In this spirit, “Post-socialism”/“post-socialist” is used to denominate the period after 1990.

² The ironies of a discourse on greater individual responsibility which in fact has women in the family the responsibility picking up the slack is not unknown to feminists.

Gender has been only a marginal concern in post-socialist reform processes. To illustrate the dimensions of change, and as one way to explore the broader gender dynamics of social policy reforms in post-socialist Central Europe, this paper undertakes an analysis of family benefit reforms after 1989. Focusing on reforms of family benefits, including maternity and childcare benefits, as well as transfers to families,³ it analyses how and why, during the post-1989 situation, “costly” benefits and services supporting women’s dual role as worker and mother - a feature of the socialist past often considered “women-friendly” (Wolchik & Meyer 1985) - changed dramatically. The reform trajectories of family benefits are key elements in the ongoing process of change of the institutional and social environment in which gender relations are negotiated.⁴

Feminist research has pointed to the fact that it is not the degree of state intervention as such, but the particular kind of policies that shape gender relations.⁵ Accordingly, as state-organized mediators between paid employment and unpaid care work, family benefits are a central instrument of welfare states to shape gender relations. An analysis of family benefit reforms needs to look at three main areas and their intersections: (1) the legacy of benefit systems, (2) the overall economic and political shifts in family policy since 1989, including the gendered values of key reform actors, as well as (3) the power dynamics between reforms actors, including among other things the relative strength of women’s voices. I deal with each of these issues below in a comparative fashion.

³ The specific benefits included in the analysis differ in the two countries. In the Czech Republic, the analysis focuses on the maternity benefit, child allowance, social allowance and parental allowance. In Poland, maternity benefit, childcare benefit, child-raising allowance, family allowance, alimony fund, guaranteed periodic benefit and benefits for pregnant women and women raising children have been included.

⁴ For earlier analyses of post-socialist reforms of social services from a gender perspective, see Einhorn 1993, Funk & Mueller 1993, Aslanbeigui 1994, Kligman 1994, Lobodzinska 1995, among others.

⁵ Feminist comparative research on Western welfare states has found larger state involvement not necessarily positively related to more gender equity (e.g. Sainsbury 1996). Instead, feminists have emphasized that variation in the type of state intervention as well as embedded family models and the organization of unpaid care work may be more relevant for women and the goal of promoting gender equality (e.g. Lewis 1997, Sainsbury 1996, 1999).

II. The legacy of economic and social policies

Three main features characterize the gendered patterns of post-WW II economies and labor markets in real socialist Central Europe.⁶ First, women were integrated into the labor market in unprecedented numbers, in particular into the industrial sector. This represented a significant change compared to pre-WW II economic structures. As a result, by Western European standards, employment rates of women were high throughout Central and Eastern Europe under Communist party rule.

Second, greater participation of women in employment led to a partial breakdown of gender stereotypes in occupations. Women occupied professions and posts from which they had largely been excluded prior to the take-over of the Communist parties. However, both vertical and horizontal gender segregation of employment opportunities prevailed. Professions continued to be coded “male” or “female”, employing a majority of men or women, respectively. And women were not found in posts of higher responsibility in numbers commensurate with their overall employment participation.⁷

Lastly, a gender gap in wages survived all commitments to equality. Despite the Communist party’s rhetoric and formal commitments, as illustrated for example in the early ratifications of internationally binding legislation, such as ILO Convention 100 on equal pay for equal work and work of equal value, women earned considerably less than men in wide sectors of the economy.⁸

Family policy in pre-1989 welfare states

At the end of the 1980s Poland and Czechoslovakia⁹ had elaborate systems of social security benefits (Deacon 1992; Castle-Kanerová 1992; Millard 1992).¹⁰ Support for

⁶ For a more extensive discussion of the gendered patterns of economic development after 1945 (and the impact of economic reforms after 1990), see Fodor 2004.

⁷ Note, however, that both horizontal and vertical segregation were less marked in CEE when compared to many Western European countries during the same time period.

⁸ Poland ratified ILO Convention 100 on equal pay for equal work and work of equal value (1953) in 1954, the Czech Republic in 1957.

⁹ Unless noted otherwise, data before 1993 used here relate to Czechoslovakia as a whole, thereafter to the Czech Republic.

families included childcare benefits and leave schemes, complemented by a state-sponsored system of crèches and kindergarten (which was, however, far less extensive in Poland than in Czechoslovakia). In addition, the prices for a number of essential products for children were subsidized by the state.¹¹

This family benefit system was profoundly gendered. It supported a high employment rate of women, by helping women workers to combine their dual roles as employees and mothers. Benefits and rewards for motherhood enabled the state to include women into the system of full, but not necessarily freely chosen, employment.¹² In contrast, men were not explicitly addressed as workers *and* fathers, or provided support to combine employment with family responsibilities. Men were even legally excluded from a variety of family benefits, especially from childcare leave schemes. Only under exceptional circumstances, such as the death of the mother, could men claim most of the family-related benefits.

Real-socialist family policy thus reinforced a very particular gendered division of labor within the family and society: Pre-socialist gender role models and cultural stereotypes were maintained, while women's economic independence was strengthened (Čermáková 2000: 42). Family benefits embodied a real-socialist notion of a "good" family, reflecting at the same time persistent conservative and patriarchal values of leading decision-makers - women were valued particularly as unpaid caretakers and homemakers, while it was nevertheless recognized that they were paid workers as well (Čermáková 2000; Seibert 2001).¹³

¹⁰ Gal and Kligman refer to East Central European states in socialism as a "kind of (failed) welfare state, if only by the classic definition that a welfare state aims to secure the basic needs of its populace" (Gal and Kligman 2000, p. 70)

¹¹ When highlighting the comprehensiveness of welfare state benefits, one should, however, be aware of the serious problems and contradictions within state socialist social policy, including the lack of basic goods and services. A number of authors have explained internal contradictions as a consequence of the subordination of social policy under greater ideological goals (Castle-Kanerová 1992) and of the "virtual monopoly of the state in determining social need" (Millard 1992: 119). For an early comparative overview of the legacy of Eastern European welfare regimes for the period of transformation to market economies, see Deacon 1992.

¹² For a discussion of the coercive aspects of employment, see Gal and Kligman 2000, p. 75f

¹³ Indeed, there were some notable particularities of family formation in Central Europe prior to 1989, including a low age at marriage, virtually universal marriage, relatively high divorce and remarriage rates in most countries (not in Poland) and childbearing at a relatively young age (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2000; UNICEF/Monee 2000; Cichocińska 1993). In Czechoslovakia, in 1989 the ages of both women and men at first marriage were the lowest in the region, with women marrying at 21.2 years in the Czech Lands.

In both Poland and Czechoslovakia, public spending on family benefits prior to 1989 was high by international standards. At the end of the 1980s it amounted to 4.4. per cent of GDP in Czechoslovakia, and 3.0 per cent in Poland, higher than in most Western European countries.¹⁴ Relatively, both countries spent a greater share of family benefit expenditure on cash benefits than on in-kind benefits, mainly childcare services (UNICEF/MONEE 1999, Fajth 1996).

Eligibility to most family benefits was linked to employment, and their level wage-based (Kuchařová 2003, Wóycicka 2003). Typically, contributions were deducted directly from payrolls: Czechoslovakia offered maternity leave and benefits, extended maternity leave¹⁵ and a special benefit for a parent to care for a sick child. Poland provided for maternity leave and benefits, childcare benefit (sick-child benefit) and child-raising leave for employed mothers. Other benefits or services such as crèches and kindergarten were often provided through the enterprise, sometimes on-site.

In addition to employment-based benefits, some family benefits were universally available and paid directly from the state budget. Czechoslovakia offered a one-time birth grant and a maternity allowance for mothers. Poland had a child-raising allowance for mothers, as well as a family allowance, which depended on the family income, but not on employment. In 1974, Poland also introduced benefits from an alimony fund to support single parents (de facto single mothers).¹⁶

In Poland, women got married at 21.7 years on average (UNICEF/Monee 2000). Motherhood was almost universal: In Czechoslovakia, during the 1980s, about 94 per cent of all women of childbearing age did in fact give birth to a child. According to one survey from the 1980s, almost half of the female population believed “that a woman who dedicates herself only to work and career is not normal” (Čermáková 2000: 85).

¹⁴ Even the economic crisis in Poland during the 1980s with massive shortages of goods did not result in cuts in social security spending.

¹⁵ Before 1989, maternity leave, strictly speaking, and childcare leave together were regularly termed “maternity leave” or “extended maternity leave”. They are mentioned here separately to emphasize their conceptual differences. Maternity leave in the sense of ILO Convention 183 is related to the protection of mother and child in relation to the child’s birth, while “extended maternity leave”, today typically termed “childcare leave”/ “parental leave” is provided to a parent for a temporary absence from employment to raise a child. With respect to the latter, there is no biological reason to restrict it to the mother.

¹⁶ A court order on eligibility for alimony was required. According to the law, the state was supposed to claim the money back from the fathers. No exact data are available on the results of the state’s collection activities. However, it is common knowledge that the enforcement of the state’s claim against non-paying fathers was weak then, and continues to be lax at present.

Maternity leave and benefits were based on long traditions in both countries: Maternity leave was introduced in the Czech Lands in 1948¹⁷, as was the child allowance to help families cover the costs related to raising children. In Poland, maternity leave and benefits had been introduced as early as 1924. The benefit for caring for a sick child was introduced in 1954.

Parental leave schemes and related benefits were of a more recent origin. Their creation was prompted by a concern about declining birth rates and accompanied by political debates and struggles. In Czechoslovakia, family benefits became an important political issue during from the second half of the 1950s, especially after demographic data indicated a decline in fertility.¹⁸ A flat-rate birth grant was introduced in 1956, and the extended two-year maternity leave in 1970, initially unpaid. At the same time, a maternity allowance was introduced for mothers of two or more children who stayed at home after their maternity leave expired. In Poland, child-raising leave was first introduced in 1968, initially consisting of a one-year leave entitlement without pay. In the 1970s, when demand for labor decreased because of growing economic difficulties, and when demographers reported declining birthrates, the state encouraged women to stay home for longer time periods (Lohmann and Seibert 2003: 78).¹⁹ Unpaid leave was extended to three years in 1972 (Wóycicka 2003: 194). Paid leave for two years was introduced only in 1980 in response to popular demand, and as a concession of the Communist government to the opposition Solidarity trade union which had initiated a campaign on the issue. A great number of Polish women took advantage of the paid childcare leave because the benefits in fact secured a decent standard of living for the mother, and the supply and quality of institutional childcare did not satisfy the demand in the country (Cichocińska 1993).

Since childcare was typically a mother's responsibility, childcare facilities were crucial to women's ability to combine employment and family responsibilities. In comparison with

¹⁷ The Worker's Health Insurance Act from 1928 had already granted maternity benefits to insured women, yet it was not consistently implemented until after WW II (Pavlik 1985).

¹⁸ As in other countries, birth rates increased immediately after the Second World War, attributed primarily to a greater number of marriages in post-war years (Pavlik 1985). In the 1950s, however, birth rates were on the decline.

¹⁹ From 2.52 in 1965, the birthrate declined to 2.2 in 1970 and was 2.27 in 1975 (Lohmann and Seibert 2003: 82).

most Western European countries, childcare was relatively widely accessible, generous and comprehensive. However, there were significant differences in the availability of childcare between Poland and Czechoslovakia: Demand for childcare places was consistently much higher than supply in Poland. Here, throughout the entire post-war period, the network of social services, among them childcare services, was less well furnished than elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, including in Czechoslovakia (Lohmann and Seibert 2003: 70); also, there were considerable differences in the availability of childcare services between different regions, especially between urban and rural settings. Moreover, criticism about the quality of the services was widespread: They were often overcrowded, and the ratio between children and employees was considered inadequate.

In both countries, nursery care enrolment, i.e. for children below age 3, was always lower than enrolment of children of kindergarten age. The often-criticized quality of services and state incentives for home care for young children through maternity leave and benefit schemes were key reasons for the discrepancy. Nursery care enrolment in Poland declined even further during the second half of the 1980s. The number of factory-run nurseries decreased by a quarter, the number of places by a third, and the number of children in nurseries by almost half, from a peak in the mid-decade. Kindergarten attendance also declined noticeably over the 1980s (Cichocińska 1993).

III. Economic, political and family benefit changes after 1990

Poland

Poland went through profound economic, political and social changes since the 1989 elections, experiencing a triple challenge of transition to a market economy, integration into a globalized world economy, and transformation for accession to the European Union. Several political swings from left to right wing governments occurred since 1990, repeatedly the result of popular discontent with the negative consequences of economic

reform and slow recovery. Despite their divergent political orientations, however, the different governments have on the whole followed a surprisingly similar economic and social policy reform recipe. Macroeconomic austerity measures set the framework for all different reform projects in the highly indebted country. In its broad effects, gender policy - or the absence thereof - has also been surprisingly similar under different governments, as the discussion below will illustrate.

Following the key postulates of the Washington consensus, Poland initiated an economic reform process which focused on macroeconomic stabilization, price and trade liberalization, and privatization (Lavigne 1995, Orenstein 2001). This had severe consequences. An initial steep decline of GDP by about 20 per cent caused a significant decline in real incomes, and a drop in economic activity rates, as well as high unemployment and growing poverty. During 1992 more than 25 per cent of all Polish families could not afford to purchase the basic necessities of food and clothing (Seibert 2001: 42). The share of the population below the poverty line circled around 12 to 17 per cent between 1995 and 2000 (Lohmann and Seibert 2003: 16).

Relative economic stabilization ensued during the mid-1990s, with fast economic growth rates, followed by a new slowdown of the economy again after 1998. Poland is regarded a successful economic reformer in CEE. Yet growth has had only a limited impact on the labor market: Both women's and men's employment rates have been decreasing massively since 1990, and women's employment rates are significantly lower than men's. Unemployment has remained at high levels of between 15 and 20 per cent since the early 1990s, with women's unemployment consistently higher than men's. Gender differences in wage levels are in the range of 15- 30 per cent, the highest gap is found in the highest wage group (Chłon-Domińczak 2004). A joint EU/ Polish government analysis concludes that "there remain significant inequalities of opportunities between women and men in the labor market" (EU / Government of Poland 2001)

Three major social policy reforms were enacted at once in 1998/1999: The reform of the education system, the national health insurance system, and the national pension scheme, which was partially privatized. Family benefit reforms during the 1990s - while in their impact no less profound - were designed and implemented in multiple steps: Among the

most significant was the decoupling of the entitlement to a number of family benefits from the employment status of the recipient. They became paid from the state budget, in some cases the central, in others the local budget. A majority of family benefits became dependent on family-income (with the exception of maternity benefits and short-term childcare benefits) (see Table 1). Cuts were applied to some benefits, and the real value of benefits further declined through inadequate adjustment for inflation.

Table 1. Entitlements and financing of family benefits. Poland 2003

Benefit	Basis for entitlement	Financing source	Means-tested/ not means tested?
Maternity leave and benefit	Employment relationship	Social insurance revenue	Not means-tested
Childcare leave and benefit²⁰	Employment relationship	Social insurance revenue	Not means-tested
Child-raising leave and allowance	Employment relationship	State budget revenues	Means-tested
Family allowance	Not employment-based	State budget revenues	Means-tested
Alimony fund²¹	Not employment-based	State budget revenues + repayments	Means-tested ²² + court order
Guaranteed periodic benefit	Former employment relationship ²³	State and local budget revenues	Means-tested
Benefits for pregnant women and women raising children	Not employment-based	State and local budget revenues	Means-tested

Source: Wóycicka 2003: 193-199

The Czech Republic

In contrast to Poland, the Czech reform path has been described as a “hybrid ‘social liberal’ strategy for transformation”, referring to a more moderate approach to reforms, for example to privatization, and the need for political compromises along the way caused by ambiguous election results and relatively instable governing coalitions

²⁰ Childcare leave in Poland describes temporary leave of absence from work taken by a parent in connection with care for a child. Leave may be taken for a maximum of 60 days per year.

²¹ Benefits from the alimony fund are granted to a person who has been awarded alimony by court order, but is unable to collect it. The overwhelming majority of beneficiaries are mothers of children whose fathers are unwilling or unable to support their children economically.

²² Means-testing of alimony benefits was waived in 1989 and reinstated in 1999.

²³ The guaranteed periodic benefit is payable to a person who has exhausted her/his right to unemployment benefits and who is raising a child as a single parent.

(Orenstein 2001: 61). As in Poland and elsewhere in the region, economic reforms in the early 1990s focused on financial stabilization, price liberalization, and the privatization of former state-owned enterprises. However, the relatively low indebted country maintained many features of the former welfare system, including universal housing subsidies and health and welfare benefits (Kuchařová 2003).

Even more radical market-oriented political forces, which advocated welfare retrenchment and incentives rather than redistribution, saw welfare state provisions as buffers against the negative consequence of the economic reforms. The center-right Civic Democratic Party (ODS), for example, in government for much of the 1990s (1992-1997) de facto employed social compensation mechanisms to maintain public support (Orenstein 2001). On the other hand, the minority government under the Social Democratic Party (CSSD), in power from 1998, despite having run on a pro-welfare state electoral platform, did not have enough political clout to implement major social policy reforms (True 2003: 15).

Sometimes referred to as the “Czech miracle,” the economic reform appeared to be the most successful in the region during the first half of the 1990s. In 1996, for example, unemployment was 3.5% compared to 15.7% in Poland. Inflation was only 8.8% compared to 19.9% in Poland. But bank failures and financial scandals ushered in a three-year recession during 1997-1999, as well as a period of serious political turmoil. During this time, the Czech Republic was lagging behind most transformation countries in annual GDP growth. By July 1998, unemployment had surpassed 6% for first time since 1989, with wide regional differences. It was as high as 15.6% in the hardest hit localities. Almost 60% of those unemployed were women and about a third young people. Women’s unemployment has been consistently higher than men’s throughout the decade of the 1990s, with particularly high rates of long-term unemployment.

The government fiscal deficit widened in 2001 to 3.2 percent of GDP as compared to 2.4 percent in 2000 and just 1.6 percent in 1999. An austerity program designed in response called for cutbacks in state spending. In 2000 and 2001, the Czech economy recovered to above three percent growth on average. The unemployment rate, however, has been in the 8.5 to nine percent range since 1999 and above nine percent in 2002.

Czechoslovakia, as Poland, entered the 1990s with a comprehensive social security system. Yet since the old system was inadequate to address some of the new needs emerging from the transition to a market economy, such as unemployment and poverty, social security reforms were regarded very important across the political landscape. Early reforms included the introduction of a household subsistence minimum, which serves as a poverty benchmark since, and the formulation of cost-of-living increases of benefits (Kuchařová 2003). Two new family benefits were introduced in 1990, the state compensatory allowance - intended to buffer the negative effect of consumer price liberalization - and a parental allowance for at-home care of children.²⁴ Other early reform steps included the revision of the maternity benefit formula, and the decoupling of the child allowance from employment.²⁵ Instead, it was made dependent on the number of children in a family, and their age.

A major reorganization of the social security system was undertaken in 1995/ 1996. Benefits were grouped into three subsystems, social insurance, social assistance, and state social support. Most family benefits are provided as state social support, with parental allowance, child allowance and social allowance forming 85 per cent of total state social support spending (Kuchařová 2003). State social support benefits are financed from general revenues and paid out through the district authorities. Some of the benefits were made income-tested, but income-testing was not applied in a very restrictive manner.²⁶ (see Table 2).

²⁴ The introduction of this benefit came in response to the separation of maternity leave/ benefits from parental leave/benefits. The maternity benefit is available to mothers for a maximum of 28 weeks around the birth of a child (37 weeks in case of multiple births). It is an insurance-based benefit, paid from sickness insurance. The replacement rate in 1990 was 90 per cent of the net income, up to a ceiling. While maternity benefits are provided to fathers only under exceptional circumstances (death or disability of the mother), fathers can receive the parental benefit for full-time care directly following the birth of a child (maternity leave is not mandatory for women). However, the amount of the parental benefit is lower than the amount of the maternity benefit.

²⁵ The calculation of the benefit was changed from 90 per cent of the net wage to 69 per cent of the previous gross wage.

²⁶ Ninety-four per cent of two-parent families with one economically active parent received the child allowance before it was income-tested (1996), and 93 per cent received it afterwards (1999). See Kuchařová 2003: 121. Income-testing is stricter in the case of the social allowance, so that only about a quarter of Czech families are entitled to social allowance.

Table 2. State social support benefits in the Czech Republic as of 1995/96

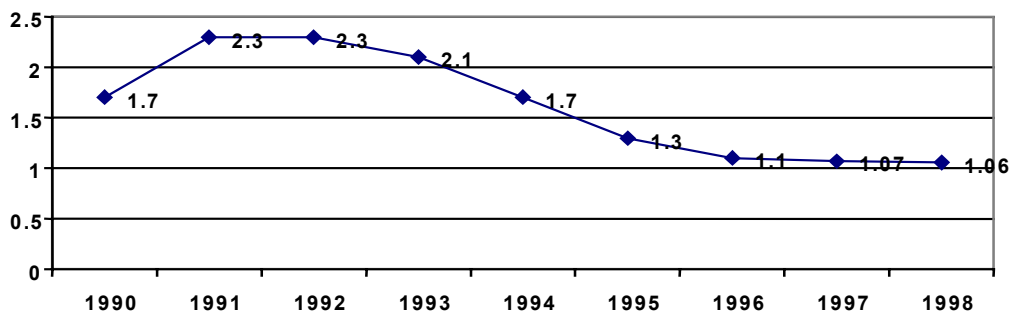
Non-income tested benefits	Income-tested benefits
Parental allowance	Child allowance
Maintenance allowance ²⁷	Social allowance
Foster care allowance	Housing allowance
Birth grant	Transport allowance
Funeral grant	

Source: Kuchařová 2003: 116

Comparative reform trends in both countries

Several broad effects of the reforms of family benefits could be observed at the end of the 1990s.²⁸ First, aggregate expenditure for family benefits in both countries declined over the course of the 1990s²⁹: In Poland during the period 1990-1998, from 1.7 to 1.06 per cent of GDP; and in the Czech Republic during the period 1996-2002, from 1.6 to 1.2 per cent of GDP (Fultz and Steinhilber 2004). See Figure 1 and Table 3.

Figure 1. Family benefits as percentage of GDP. Poland 1990-98



It is noteworthy that in Poland during most of the 1990s, the share of family benefits in total social expenditure declined, while total social expenditure increased. This suggests that family benefits were more affected by cuts than other social security benefits, for

²⁷ This allowance supports the families of soldiers during fulfillment of their basic (substitute) military training, civil service or military training.

²⁸ The following analysis is based on Fultz and Steinhilber 2004

²⁹ Note that different levels of aggregation of family income data by household size complicate comparisons between both countries.

example pensions (Wóycicka 2003: 207). Further savings in family benefits were achieved by reducing benefit adjustments for inflation. Consequently, the share of family benefits in household income declined significantly (Wóycicka 2003: 195).

Table 3. Three family benefits, total spending and spending as a percentage of GDP, the Czech Republic, 1996-2000 (CZK, thousands)

Benefit	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Child allowance	12,19	12,50	12,49	12,47	12,75	12,80	13,35
Social allowance	6,24	6,22	6,27	6,25	6,20	6,00	6,27
Parent allowance	7,36	7,61	7,78	7,72	7,69	7,70	8,02
Total of three benefits	25,79	26,33	25,54	26,44	26,64	26,50	27,64
Gross domestic product (GDP)	1 572,30	1 668,80	1 798,30	1 833,00	1 910,60	2 175,20	2 275,60
GDP accounted for by the three benefits	1,64%	1,58%	1,47%	1,44%	1,39%	1,22%	1,21%

Source: Government of the Czech Republic, quoted in Fultz and Steinhilber 2004: 260

A second effect of the reforms in both countries was a concentration of benefits on low-income households, and a concurrent reduction of overall numbers of beneficiaries. In the Czech Republic, the proportion of families receiving the three most important family benefits fell by half. At the same time, those still eligible for all three benefits experienced increases between 3 and 10 per cent of net family income (Fultz and Steinhilber 2004, Kuchařová 2003: 125).

In Poland, by 1998, family benefits were significantly more important for low income households, as compared to higher income households. Family benefits represented 12 per cent of household income for families in the lowest income decile, but just 0.15 per cent for those in the top decile. The numbers of beneficiaries of employment-related benefits and of recipients of the family allowance have declined drastically, between 30-60 per cent, depending on the benefit scheme. The decline is explained by high unemployment (in the case of employment-related benefits), strict benefit entitlements and the sharp decline in birth rates.

Notably, the benefit in Poland which most directly serves women and their children, the alimony benefit, is also the one with dramatically increased numbers of beneficiaries throughout the 1990s. Initially, the income-test for the benefit had been waived in 1989,

causing an increase in numbers of beneficiaries (Wóycicka 2003). Yet, even after the reintroduction of income-testing, the numbers of beneficiaries increased, as did overall spending. Between 2001 and 2002, the fund saw a 6.1. per cent increase of beneficiaries, and a 16 per cent spending increase (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy 2003: 44). This is an indication of the precarious situation of single mothers in the country. Yet in 2004, the alimony fund was abolished completely, sparking a wave of protest among women's organizations all over the country.

Third, in the changed overall economic environment in both countries, the de-facto value of family benefits is called into question. Evidence suggests a gap between *de jure* entitlements to family benefits and protective legislation on the one hand, and their practical use on the other (Heinen and Portet 2002).³⁰ There are multiple accounts of employers discriminating against women workers with family responsibilities, for example by limiting their contracts to avoid family leave. There is evidence that women in both countries do not use their employment-based rights for fear of reprisals by employers: They run the risk of job-loss or unfavorable re-assignment, as is reported (Fultz and Steinhilber 2004: 259). Because of the weak data, it is difficult to assess potential differences between Poland and the Czech Republic in this regard

IV. The Politics of Gender and Family Benefit Reforms Compared

Gender equality was not given priority in the economic and social reform agendas in either country. Promoting gender equality was never mentioned as a family benefit reform goal as such. For the Czech Republic, Čermáková concludes that at least until the end of 1997 - when the Department for Equality of Men and Women was established - "women's issues were the least of governmental and state administration concerns" (Čermáková 2000: 31). Similarly, Wóycicka argues that the family policies implemented over the course of the 1990s range from "passive to harmful" in their effect for gender equality in the reconciliation of parental and work responsibilities (Wóycicka 2003: 221).

While not emphasizing gender equality, social policy reform debates in both countries did, however, focus widely on the family and highlight the importance of combating

³⁰ Anecdotal evidence along the same lines was produced in qualitative research for Steinhilber 2003.

family poverty. The family was addressed as “the most natural social group which should (...) ensure the care for its members and form their material and intellectual needs from childhood until old age” (Průša 1994, quoted in Čermáková 2000: 42). Supporting families in coping with economic hardship resulting from the transition was considered eminently important, as increasing responsibilities were assigned to families in the reform process. Gender relations in families, however, and the impact of family benefits on them did not become an issue for public debate.

The proclaimed family focus of reforms matched public demands and a widespread sense of entitlement of citizens: Pre-1989, support for families had been regarded a constitutive part of state responsibilities, and as, at least partial, compensation for the inadequacies of the planned economy. The importance of family networks for day-to-day life in an economy of scarcity has often been emphasized (Večerník 1995; Večerník and Mateju 1999; Marksová-Tominová 2003; Seibert 2001, Ciechocińska 1993, Giza-Poleszczuk 1992). In continuation, many citizens called for state-support to families as a matter of social justice after 1989 (Steinhilber 2003, UNDP and Charles University Prague 2003).

In this climate, women’s needs were addressed indirectly:³¹ Women benefited as members of other social groups, such as low-income households or the unemployed. Yet they were addressed as needing support in their roles as mothers or heads of households, not as individuals or in their roles as economic actors (Kuchařová 2003: 134). Echoing the strong norm of motherhood and the importance of women’s role as caregivers in both countries in the period after 1945, women’s needs continue to be conceptualized in relation to their stereotypical gender roles.

The changes in entitlement criteria have shifted the status of beneficiaries from holders of personal rights to petitioners of the state, required to prove their need (Fultz and Steinhilber 2004: 260). Because of the pervasive means-testing of benefits and the contraction of the state in social security provision, this effect is more pronounced in Poland than in the Czech Republic. Yet a renewed debate about stricter means-testing, for example of the child allowance, in the Czech Republic in 2004 follows the same trend

³¹ On the politicisation and interpretation of “need” and “the needy”, see Fraser 1989, for empirical observations along similar lines, see Haney 2002

(Kuchařová 2004). Additionally, means-tested benefits not only imply potential stigmatization of the applicant, they are also more vulnerable to further cuts in response to changing political conjunctures.

Interconnected with the typically conservative family-oriented undercurrent during the reforms was a re-emergent debate about “good motherhood” which permeated the family benefit reform process in both countries. Notably, good mothers were not referred to as mothers who care for their children while also being gainfully employed. Instead, motherhood was proclaimed as full-time dedication. In the Czech Republic, income restrictions associated with the parental allowance exemplify this idea: While receiving the parental allowance, a mother could not maintain strong links to the labor market. A proposal of the governing Social Democrats to lift the income restrictions was countered by conservative political forces in the parliamentary debate who were concerned about Czech women becoming “bad mothers” if the restrictions were lifted. Women would then focus on making money instead of caring for children (Marksová-Tominová 2003: 56).

In Poland, the strong presence of Catholic family values and the traditional image of the “Polish Mother” have helped shaping the debate on “motherhood” and family benefits (Seibert 2001, Heinen and Portet 2000). Religious values and the role of the church and other faith-based actors and organizations played an important and durable role for families in Poland, as the World Values Survey (1981-2001) shows (Inglehart & Norris 2003).

This has not been the case in the Czech Republic. Abortion and women’s reproductive rights been permanent topics on the political agenda in Poland, and religious values have influenced politics widely across party lines. The Church exerts particularly strong influence on some areas of social policy, such as abortion and contraception, and remains a loud voice in favor of traditional family values and gender roles (Einhorn 1993; Heinen and Matuchniak-Krasuska 1995; Zielińska 2000).

Other topics also had the subtext of a debate about good motherhood, equating women’s interests with mothers’ interests. The introduction of a new “benefit for pregnant women and women raising children” in 1993 is a telling example. It was introduced jointly with the strict anti-abortion legislation, which made access to legal abortion in the country

virtually impossible. In practice, thus, the benefit offered limited economic support to women who were deprived of their reproductive self-determination. However, as expenditure for this benefit dramatically exceeded estimations, both the duration and the level of the benefit were soon cut, in two steps in 1994 and 2002 (Wóycicka 2003: 199). While the anti-abortion legislation was not liberalized the benefit level and duration were again significantly cut in 2002, this time under a left-wing government. The example illustrates how fragile the respect to women's needs was, and how quickly it was overturned by political change and fiscal priorities.

A second example from Poland is the debate about the length of maternity leave. Throughout the 1990s, maternity leave had been 16 weeks. In 2000, the parliament under a conservative majority extended maternity leave to 20 weeks, and again from 20 to 26 weeks in 2001.³² The argument in both cases was that longer leave would be “in women's interest”, and promote child-bearing. The subsequent left-wing government, however, cut back the leave to 16 weeks again,³³ emphasizing the adverse effect that long leave had on women's employment situation, and the need for fiscal austerity. They also claimed to act “in women's interest”.

To date, there has been no similar debate about what constitutes a “good father” in either country. Hence, the debate about combining employment and family responsibilities has been regarded as solely a “women's issue”. In both countries, measures to support parents in combining both responsibilities have only been secondary goals, if mentioned at all, of the social security reforms. The reform of the Czech parental allowance illustrates this: As mentioned before, it was initially designed as a universal benefit for a parent who provides full-time home care for a child below four years of age. In principle, the parent was allowed to work, but she/he faced severe earnings restrictions. Moreover, the child could be placed in childcare for no more than three (later raised to five) days a month. This made continuing education as well as job search - much less paid work - very difficult for benefit recipients. Thus the restrictions contributed to separating a caring parent from the world of paid work (Marksová-Tominová 2003, Čermáková 2000).

³² For multiple births, it was extended from 26 to 30 weeks, and to 36 weeks in 2001.

³³ For the second child, 18 weeks of leave are granted, and 26 in the case of multiple births.

Violation of the restriction was widespread, reflecting the gap between policymakers' intentions and women's day-to-day reality. The income restrictions were only lifted in 2003, after an intense debate and lobbying efforts of women. It is now hoped that the benefit will in fact help parents to maintain links with the labor market, instead of forcing them to choose between mutually exclusive alternatives (Kuchařová 2004).

A contradictory message is sent by inconsistent benefit regulations in the Czech Republic: After an extension in 1995, a parent can now receive the parental allowance for a maximum of four years. Again, the extension was described as a measure desired by women and beneficial to them (Čermáková 2000b, in Marksová-Tominová 2003).

However, the employment protection (i.e. the employees right to return to the same or same-level job after the leave) expires after three years already. Therefore, parents cannot take advantage of the full allowance and enjoy employment protection. In fact, about 80 per cent of women with small children return to work before or immediately after the parental leave period ends (Family Life Patterns 1996, quoted in Kuchařová 2003: 132). Moreover, men enjoy employment protection during parental leave only since 2001.

Both countries have moved to increase formal gender equality by giving equal access to childcare benefits to women and men. Provisions of pre-existing laws that had barred fathers from using benefits or had imposed stricter rules on them were eliminated (Fultz and Steinhilber 2004: 255). In Poland, equal treatment in the eligibility to childcare benefit and child-raising allowance was guaranteed from 1995 and 1996, respectively. In the Czech Republic, eligibility to the parental allowance was equalized in 1990, and employment protection for men finally introduced in 2001. In an exceptional move to introduce a measure specifically designed at men, Poland extended a two week period of the maternity leave and benefit for fathers.

Equal access to benefits, however, has not changed the entrenched gender roles in child caring.³⁴ Available data, though incomplete, suggest that the take-up of benefits by fathers has not increased. In the Czech Republic during the period 1995-98, fathers represented less than 1 per cent of recipients of childcare benefits (Kuchařová et.al. 2003,

³⁴ Note that entrenched gender roles in elderly care have been absent from family benefit debates so far, and are topic in dire need for more research.

p. 130).³⁵ In Poland, statistics on the use of childcare benefits by men and women are not available, indicating the weak interest on gender trends on the side of public administration - much less a desire to change the situation.

Economic and fiscal pressures have clearly influenced the social policy reform agenda in both countries, with higher external debt creating a greater pressure for fiscal restraint in Poland than in the Czech Republic. Yet fiscal pressures as such cannot explain where budgets are cut: The analysis of expenditure trends in Poland, for example, indicates that family benefits suffered greater cuts than other social security benefits. Clearly, political dynamics and power struggles interlink with gender ideologies of reform actors.

Power shifts influenced Polish family policy noticeably at times, creating a back-and-forth movement of reform projects and proposals. The overarching goal of fiscal austerity, however, has guided both right- and left-wing governments. Yet it was particularly under right-wing governments that family benefits were instrumentalized as means to boost a traditional notion of women as mothers and caregivers, justifying the measures underway. The above-mentioned case of the extension of maternity leave under the Right and the subsequent reversal under the Left is one example. It was also under postsocialist right-wing governments in Poland that concerns about declining birthrates and desires to control women's reproductive behavior acquired particular importance in social policy debates (Zielińska 2000). However, left-leaning governments have not been explicitly committed to promoting gender equality either. Opinion-leaders of the left have used less openly moralistic and conservative gender ideology, and formulated somewhat less contradictory reform projects. Yet their eyes were set on fiscal austerity rather than women's rights.³⁶

In the Czech Republic, in turn, shifts in political power and the weakness of elected governments based on small, if any, majorities have in practice led to a moderation of reform proposals and to political compromise, or reform standstill at times (Orenstein 2001). Radical reform proposals, for example the introduction of stricter means-testing of

³⁵ Tellingly, the Czech statistical yearbook continues to use the term "extended maternity leave".

³⁶ Women's organizations had hoped that the strict anti-abortion legislation would be relaxed under a left-leaning government taking this as an indicator of a party's commitment to women's rights. This has still not happened, however.

benefits, were softened in the political process, as in the case of the child allowance. Moderate means-testing may be seen as a small gain only, however, since social democrats initially had strongly argued in favor of a universal child allowance (Marksová-Tominová 2003: 58). Yet it appears that the practice of political compromise orchestrated by relatively weak political powers has been one of the reasons for a wide acceptance of the social policy reforms in the country (UNDP/ Charles University 2003: 63). The need for – and political practice of - compromise, however, has sustained the sidelining of proposals for greater attention to gender equality as one social policy goal.

Voices in favor of gender equality have been institutionally weak and often politically fragmented in both countries. For much of the 1990s, women's organizations struggled to become recognized political actors. Under conditions of radical political change and in an “associational wasteland” (Offe 1993), civil society organizations, among them women's organizations, needed to gain strength and stability first, while lack of access to funding and an inadequate legal framework created severe obstacles (Čermáková 2000). At the same time, gender issues were marginalized politically and faced strongly negative public attitudes as they were associated with the past (Čermáková 2000: 33-34). Moreover, the purported women-friendliness of state socialism today serves to “delegitimize women's political activity in postcommunism”, as Gal and Kligman argue (Gal and Kligman 2000).

Existing women's organizations, while becoming stronger and more numerous over the course of the 1990s, were often concerned with topics other than family benefits. The very low political representation of women after the first post-socialist elections became a core focus of attention for activist women in both countries, as was employment, where women's losses were immediately felt strongly. In addition, in Poland reproductive rights motivated women's organizations strongly throughout the decade, crystallizing in major debates in 1989 and 1992/1993. Though in the end not successful in stopping the anti-abortion legislation, the debate itself contributed to a strengthening of the organizational networks in the country. While social security was not a central concern, the “packaging” of family benefit reforms caused further problems for feminist social policy discussions: Because the benefit for pregnant women and mothers was introduced in conjunction with the law on abortion, women's activists had to find a way to argue *for* family benefits

without defending the abortion law. It was only the discontinuation of the alimony fund 2004 that instigated a broad coalition of women's organizations on a social security issue in Poland.

Women's weak institutional representation at governmental and administrative levels in both countries further contributed to the lack of attention to gender issues during the enactment of social reforms. It was not until the end of 1997 that a Department for the Equality of Men and Women was established in the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.³⁷ A number of observers agree that institutional progress came mainly in response to the requirements imposed on the country as part of the EU accession negotiations, and that the state's attitude toward gender issues has been formal rather than indicative of a substantive commitment to gender equality (Čermáková 2000, Marksová-Tominová 2003).³⁸

In Poland, no gender equality institution existed during the period when the most profound social reforms were being devised. The institutional political representation of women's rights and gender equality experienced a number of turnabouts during the decade. An early proposal for an Equal Status Act was initiated in 1992 by feminist groups and carried on by the Parliamentary Women's Group. It proposed the creation of a Commissioner for Equal Status. While the ensuing several year-long debate did not result in the enactment of the legislation, at least it helped the formation and public presence of women's organizations (Regulska 1998).³⁹ Between 1992 and 1995, the post of the Plenipotentiary for Women and Family was left vacant. After the election victory of the right in 1997, the office was replaced by the Plenipotentiary for Family Affairs, explicitly entrusted with the task of promoting a traditional family model in line with the "family oriented policy of the state" (ILO 1999). Again, after a change in government in 2001, and in response to strong lobbying efforts by women's organizations, the current

³⁷ At the same time, the Section for Equal Opportunities of Men and Women was created in the Committee for the Government of the Czech Republic for Human Rights, as well as the parliamentary Committee for Social Affairs and Healthcare, which replaced the Committee for the Equal Position for Women abolished after the 1996 elections (Čermáková 2000: 32).

³⁸ Interestingly, the ministerial department in charge of equal opportunities for women and men was in fact placed in the Department for the Preparation of the Integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union.

³⁹ Regulska emphasizes the local level in women's political organizing in Poland, which, as she argues, to some extent compensates for their absence in national and official political fora (Regulska 1998).

Plenipotentiary for the Equal Status of Women and Men was established. It was thanks to a public outcry that a substantial weakening of the political leverage of the institution could be avoided at the end of 2004.

While institutional representation of gender equality within governmental structures in both countries is ensured today, de facto, these institutions have so far not become voices for progress in the area of gender equality in social security and family benefits, despite the fact that in principle, social security is in their mandate. For example, the Polish Plenipotentiary is entrusted with coordinating all activities to secure equal opportunities for women and men. Yet it has not played a visible role in the debates around the 2004 reform of the family benefit system, and has only been marginal in pension reform debates. Similarly, the Czech ministerial department has not dedicated itself to social security issues either.

Concluding remarks

Social policy and social security system reform have been central to post-socialist reforms in Central and Eastern Europe, including in the Czech Republic and in Poland, the two cases considered here. Both countries followed somewhat different reform paths: Poland chose swifter and more radical reforms, the Czech Republic a somewhat more moderate social-liberal reform path. These differences were reflected in the area of social security, including family benefits, as well. During the 1990s Poland moved further than other post-socialist countries in the direction of a residualist and familial model of a welfare state. The Czech Republic to date, although reforms were often justified in similar terms, has maintained a greater role for the state in the provision of social welfare.

In the 1990s climate for economic reform, with a clear focus on macroeconomic stability and fiscal austerity, budgetary concerns have been strong arguments in social policy debates. The Czech Republic has seen itself under weaker constraints in this respect than the highly indebted Poland. Yet tight state budgets and neoliberal economic reform ideologies need to be analyzed jointly with political dynamics and power struggles to understand reform trajectories.

Gender has been given only a marginal attention in post-socialist reform processes, yet they have been strongly gendered, both in design and effect. This paper has undertaken an analysis of family benefit reforms after 1989, understanding family benefits as a central instrument of welfare states to shape gender relations.

Despite the quite different reform approaches taken in both countries, seen from the perspective of gender dynamics of family reforms and their effects, they show at least as many commonalities as differences. For one, family benefits in both countries continue to embody a conservative family model. At no time during the post-1989 reforms were family benefits used by policymakers, or even referred to in debates, as instruments to stimulate a change in the stereotypical division of labor between women and men. No incentives were created to stimulate change in men's gender roles, or to support the de-gendering of care work. Also, the discourse on family benefits has not included "non-standard" families as legitimate family forms.

In addition, policymakers have upheld a tradition of seeing family benefits as instruments to redress declining population growth – a practice already well in use during socialist times, with no empirically clearly proven effect. Pro-natalism through family benefits (and strict anti-abortion policies) is more pronounced in Poland at the moment, but is a topic on the rise in the Czech Republic as well.

While there are these continuities, a shift in the nature of family benefits and in their justification has also been noticeable. In the past, family benefits served the dual role of supporting women in combining paid work and family responsibilities, while also forming part of the state-sponsored system of income support and redistribution. Need for support was justified by women's roles as workers and mothers. Despite women's continued attachment to the labor market today, even more so in the Czech Republic than in Poland, today they face greater difficulties in combining employment and family responsibilities.⁴⁰

Governments have withdrawn from the tradition of state-organized income-distribution and welfare provision, now prioritizing the reduction of poverty, limited state

⁴⁰ Of course this is only partially due to the impact of family benefit reforms, but due to multiple changes on the labor market, among other factors.

intervention, and subsidiarity, i.e. provision of support at the lowest possible level – which in fact often means reliance on women’s unpaid family work. While similar in its direction, again, this change has been more brisk in Poland than in the Czech Republic.

The avenue to access social rights for women has become more narrow, and women’s need for state support is interpreted differently today: Most benefits are either linked to employment (while at the same time finding and keeping employment has become more difficult under conditions of a market-economy) or to fulfilling a traditional gender role as mother and caretaker in precarious economic circumstances. The effect of this change is felt strongly among those women who do not live in low-income households and have therefore lost their entitlement to benefits. While justified from the point of view of those who assign the highest priority of social security to combating poverty, this policy is questionable from the point of view of gender-equality: Feminist social policy debates have emphasized that to enhance gender equality, support for women as a matter of right is as important as support for combining the dual roles and targeted interventions to promote a shift in gender roles. The situation in both Poland and the Czech Republic is far from satisfactory for women in this respect.

The legacy of past benefit systems, economic and political shifts since 1989, as well as power dynamics between key reform actors and their gendered values constitute a multifaceted web in which gender is being negotiated. In the name of “women’s interests” and “needs” – but without their adequate political representation and participation in the decisionmaking process, family benefit reforms have impacted women’s – and men’s - employment and life choices and posed challenges to women’s economic independence, public presence and reproductive options. Reform discourses have invoked and aimed to recreate a traditional gender structure that is often in contradiction to the reality of women’s day-to-day lives. The durable conservatism with respect to gender roles and values in both countries, together with the political marginalization of women, have come to bear very forcefully in the reform processes since 1989. It is here, where both countries show many hidden and open structural similarities – and are very much like their neighboring countries, and (fellow) EU member states.

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