

Towards Equality: Bulgarian Women's Work in Transition

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Introduction

The officially declared objective of promoting equality between men and women during socialism has resulted in important achievements. In the sphere of work however, discrimination persisted in hidden and open forms. The transition to market economy disclosed and reinforced some of them. Additional risks stem from the deterioration of social security and social services as well as from the decline in the health care system. Over the past 15 years, the combined effect of these factors has made Bulgarian women a vulnerable social group affected by poverty and social exclusion.

At the same time, the transition to market economy opens up new opportunities matching the high educational attainments and professional aspirations of Bulgarian women. These factors facilitate the advancement of women at work and in society. A new legislative and institutional framework for promotion of gender equality is emerging in Bulgaria.

Equality at Work under Socialism:

Mixed Results

According to the Marxist paradigm, the elimination of private property is a fundamental precondition for economic and personal emancipation of women, for achievement of a genuine equality between man and women (Engels, 1978). This idea guided economic and social policies in Bulgaria between 1944 and 1989. During this period, legal prerequisites and institutions were created that guaranteed equal access to education, free and universal medical care, a broad set of social services. Under the condition of guaranteed full employment, these provisions favored mass participation of women in the sphere of paid labour. At the same time, patriarchal representations and practices persisted in the domains of work and family. They reproduced latent discrimination of women and traditional family roles. The outcome was job segregation and feminization of some occupations. In addition, women had to take the heavy burden of domestic labour resulting in the so called „double shift” (Paukert, 1995, p.1).

The economic development of Bulgaria after 1944 was based on accelerated industrialization and urbanization paralleled by mass employment opportunities. The high rate of economic growth made the participation of women in paid employment an economic necessity (Dimitrova 1998: 65). During the period between 1950 and 1985 the female participation rate in the country was among the highest in the world. Between 1950 and 1980 the share of Bulgarian women working full-time in the labour force increased from 40.0 % to 48.5 % (Women in the World and in Bulgaria, 1994). Economic growth created favorable conditions for the employment of women in all branches and occupations including those traditionally considered a male domain. The expansion of industry favoured the employment of women in the manufacturing sector. Their share increased from 33.8 % to 49. % of the industrial labour force between 1960 and 1985 (Women in Economic Activity 1985: 141). In the mid 1980s Bulgarian women comprised 3 % of the engineers and 38 % of university professors (Women in the World and in Bulgaria 1995; Women in Economic Activity 1985: 141). In 1990 the ratio of tertiary school enrolment was 106 girls per 100 boys (The World's Women 1995: 99).

Parallel to this development processes of horizontal and vertical segregation, of concentration of women in certain branches and occupations, and on the bottom of organizations took place. The patterns of segregation of work under socialism did not differ very much from those in countries with market economies marked by occupational sex segregation as „one of the most pernicious aspects of inequality in the labour market since it is generally accompanied by lower pay and worse condition in female occupations.” (Anker et al. 2003, p. 1).

The sectors and occupations most feminized were light industry (in particular textile industry), sales, teaching, nursing, and social care. In the second half of the 80s, health care and social work, clerical and secretarial jobs, and services in general were strongly dominated by women. In nursing and childcare their share was 97 % (The World's Women 1995: 127, 141).

Thus, under socialism 'pink ghettos' were formed with limited opportunities for professional mobility, additional qualification and better pay. As far as vertical segregation is concerned, women had difficulties to reach the higher and top levels of the hierarchies in organizations. In 1990 women occupied 29 % of the administrative and managerial jobs (The World's Women 1995: 156). Even in the feminized occupational domains like schools and health care institutions the superiors were usually men. Vertical and horizontal segregation determined the wage gap between women and men. Similarly to other countries in Eastern and Western Europe, at the end of the 80s Bulgarian women received approximately 75 % of the average male wage (Stoyanovska 2001: 7).

The full employment of women under socialism had also high individual costs. Family ideologies changed at a slower pace than official ideology. Thus, women had to cope with the double shift of work and family responsibilities. An average Bulgarian woman had to work 9 hours more than man per week (The World's Women 1995: 105). This has often put limits on women's professional aspirations. Despite official claims and de jure equality, latent discrimination of women in hiring, promotion, and pay persisted in Bulgaria and resulted in silent acceptance of de facto unequal treatment of women and men at work.

Transition to market economy: risks and opportunities

The situation of women in Bulgaria during the transition to market economy is determined by the legacy of latent inequalities and by the emergence of new challenges resulting from the radical changes in property rights, structure of production, and organization of work (Dimitrova 1998: 78- 9). The changes are accompanied by a shift away from the former dominant egalitarian view according to which gender equality is guaranteed through the strong redistributive functions of the state. Within the emerging new organizational paradigm, gender equality is based on equal opportunities instead (Monitoring of the Process of Accession 2002: 22).

The economic recession during the 1990s led to a sharp decline in the labour force participation of both men and women. Unemployment grew steadily, particularly between 1995 and 2001 when it reached 19.4 %. Statistically, the gender differences in unemployment rates were not very significant (Beleva et al 2004: 16). However, the data can be misleading if

other characteristics of unemployment are not taken into account. The share of women in the group of long-term unemployed is around 60 %. Within this group young women and women aged above 45 are particularly disadvantaged (Statesmen and Worker Bees 2000: 47). These two categories face barriers of sex and age. Employers fear that young women might eventually take maternity leave. Prejudices that women above 45 are less capable and less motivated to learn and adjust to the new conditions of work also contribute to this unfavourable situation. Women are more often ready to accept jobs that are below their level of qualification or low pay and precarious employment conditions. On the other side, women more frequently use job-search services and show higher participation rates in occupational retraining courses (Global Employment Trends 2003: 63).

Thus, in the transition period the inequality between women and men at work persisted and deepened and new, previously unknown forms of inequality emerged. The feminization of teaching, nursing, and sale is well above 75 %. The vertical segregation is clearly shown by the fact that in 2000 women occupied only 28 % of all positions in „administrative and managerial jobs" (Statesmen and Working Bees 2000: 47). In the decade after 1989 the share of women in the Bulgarian Parliament decreased from 21 % in 1990 to 10.4 % in 2000 (Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities 2000: 24).

Of particular concern is the situation of women working in the informal economy, which contributes approximately 30 % to the GDP and where women represent two thirds of the employed (Beleva et al. 2004: 9). Women often work in this sector without work contracts, social benefits, health insurance, and pension contributions. Their working time is not regulated. Women engaged in the informal economy often have to accept jobs requiring lower qualification because of the lack of alternatives in the formal economy. In times of economic hardships women with university diplomas have become street vendors.

The changes in property rights brought about gender differences regarding the indicator "status in employment". Some 1.4 % of working women are employers against 3.3 % of men, and some 6.3 % of working women are statistically included in the category of "self employed" against 11.0 % of men. These differences affect women's earnings. In 2000, Bulgarian women received 72 % of the average wage earned by men (Statesmen and Working Bees 2000: 47).

There are many factors accountable for the situation of Bulgarian women in the labour market today. The first concerns structural problems of demand and supply of labour during the transition to market economy. Other reasons pertain to attitudes and mentalities. They consist in barriers stemming from gender stereotypes and prejudices that employers share and apply in hiring, firing, promotion, and pay. The third factor has to do with the lower aspirations of the women.

The unfavourable position of Bulgarian women in the labour market can partly be explained by factors related to their education and qualification and the persisting mismatch between their educational profile and the jobs offered. The transformation of the educational system is slow and does not match the needs of the emerging market economy. Another negative factor relates to the lower labour mobility of women.

In addition to these objective obstacles there are attitudinal barriers and stereotypes affecting women's work. Such stereotypes are shared by many employers who hold traditional views about „natural“ female features that make them suitable only for certain types of jobs. In violation of the legislation, which is in line with the standards of the ILO and the EU, the employers continue to apply discriminatory practices. In Bulgarian newspapers one can come across job advertisings with requirements for age and/or physical appearance.

The disadvantages mentioned above have detrimental effects on the self-confidence and professional aspirations of women. A survey on „Women, Work and Globalization“ conducted by the Agency for Social Analyses in 2001-2002 is telling in this respect. Some 44% of working women are afraid that they might lose their job while this applies to 35% of men. The data also confirm that women are more willing to accept jobs that require qualifications below their educational level. The new economy opens up new opportunities, but women are much less confident of the possibility to establish their own business. Some 16% of the working women are ready to take this challenge against 27% of men.

All in all, the quality of women's lives has suffered during transition. The erosion of the socialist welfare state led to a sharp decrease in the access to childcare facilities and social services. Currently, women on average spend 4 hours more per day on household work than men (Stoyanovska 2001: 8).

Perspectives

In spite of the accumulated problems, the situation of Bulgarian women in the labour market is far from pessimistic. To start with, the economic situation of the country has begun to stabilize after the difficult 1990s, with GDP growth after 2000 varying between 4% and 5%. Secondly, with a view to the integration of Bulgaria in the European Union foreseen for January 2007, there is an ongoing change in social and labour legislation, including equal opportunities legislation. These changes create important conditions for progressive elimination of gender discrimination, equal treatment of women and men at work, equal pay for equal work, and a better balance between work and family life. Thirdly, during the transition Bulgarian women sustained high educational attainments and did not abandon their professional ambitions. The probability that women will return to their traditional family roles is low. According to the data of the survey 'Women, Work and Globalization' 75% of women consider that „the best way to be independent is to work“.

Conclusion

Twice since 194, the social and working status of Bulgarian women has gone through great transformations. Under socialism and during transition to market economy, gender persisted as a factor of inequality at work, in the family, and in society regardless of different ownership structures, production patterns, the degree of economic development, and changes in the value systems. In order to combat this rigid social phenomenon, it is necessary to mobilize a strong political will and financial resources, to strengthen the legal framework and institutional mechanisms, and to develop the commitment of women themselves. After all, this is now the third generation of Bulgarian women actively participating in the sphere of paid work and in social life, and their efforts should not have been in vain.

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