a r t i c l e s

Gender and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of state socialism in Eastern and Central Europe, many western observers eagerly awaited the justification of the liberal democratic/capitalist model in the emerging social and political environments. The concept of 'civil society', idealized by both western and eastern European political theory, was central to the discourse of transformation, and the voices of hitherto marginalized and repressed peoples were expected to emerge from the ruined regime of state-organized collectivity. The mobilization of women in particular, disproportionately affected by the social and economic hardship of transition, was keenly anticipated.

This article looks at the ideological construction of civil society, which provided the context in terms of the language and identities available for political activism. It explores both the material and the ideological conditions that affected women's ability to mobilize and to form political and/or feminist identities during the process of transformation. It also contextualizes women's activism in relation to liberal-democratic politics and feminism.

Two country case studies, Poland and Yugoslavia, provide empirical examples of the ways in which women formed groups and the kinds of political questions they posed. Further, they illustrate the impact of cross-currents, in which the transformation from socialism to democracy and a market economy met the ideological constraints of religious traditionalism and nationalism respectively. Placing the concepts of civil society and political identity in specific historical and cultural contexts in this way will help to explain the perceived 'absence' of a women's movement in the region at this time.

Keywords

gender, civil society, Central and Eastern Europe, women's movements, feminism, transition, transformation, gender and nationalism

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The transformation from state socialism to liberal democracy in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe since 1989 has been accompanied by fundamental shifts in the material conditions of society and daily life.[1] The political and economic changes also involved reworking the discourses and concepts used to make sense of the social, cultural and political landscape. Women in this process of transition, have undeniably fared badly.[2] The disproportionately high female share of unemployment, together with a widespread revival of nationalist and traditionalist ideologies, has had the effect of relegating women once more to the domestic sphere and has led to their growing desocialization. In this sphere women are subject to increasing violence and discrimination in the climate of frustration and social inequality often associated with a competitive marketplace. Moreover, it is crucial to recall that political, economic and social structures are imbued with notions of correct gender roles and identities that are naturalized in the service of dominant ideological and cultural standpoints. Therefore the physical, social and economic changes of transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, as elsewhere, have been accompanied by a reconfiguration of gender dynamics. Indeed, what constituted 'masculinity' and 'femininity', socially, politically and economically has been shifting (Duhaček 1998a).

The combination of this gendered dimension of transition, and notions of the new political 'freedom' open to hitherto oppressed populations led to widespread expectations for the growth of a 'women's movement' in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed much feminist theory states that women's movements characteristically emerge in times of political change in which new opportunities for activism arise (Bystydzienski 1992; Randall 1998). However, despite the fact that women throughout the region had been actively involved in social movements both before and during state socialism, the anticipated 'feminist movement' failed to materialize in post-transformation societies. This appeared counterintuitive, given women's earlier involvement in oppositional activity. As Diane Duffy has pointed out, 'Dynamic people do not just disappear or turn into sheep when a threat is gone' (2000: 217). This article examines the reasons for this apparent 'absence' of women's political activity. It will discuss how political and other identities constructed during the transformation process[3] since 1989 have acted to encourage or discourage women's use of civil society spaces for collective action. It explores the material and ideological conditions that affected women's ability to mobilize at this time, and also contextualizes the activism that *was* occurring in terms of its relation to feminism, to liberal democratic politics and to the expectations of western feminists. We first outline civil society theory and its relation to gender and women's/feminist movements, before going on to discuss the nature and shape of the movements which have emerged in the region since 1989 and how these relate to the construction of women's political identities. We use case studies from Poland and the former Yugoslavia as contrasting examples of the formation of these identities in two politically different contexts.

First though, as Daša Duhaček has stressed, 'The historical diversity of the region cannot be overemphasised, even within the shared part of its history' (1998a: 1). Pre-World War II historical and cultural differences as well as variations in the level of economic development of different countries during the period of 1939–45 and after are crucial to understanding women's political and social status. Differences also arise in the nature and legacy of the state socialist regime within different national contexts and historical periods. These differentiated processes have been described by Daša Duhaček as 'the economic attire of the public/private split in Eastern Europe engaged in political crossdressing' (Duhaček 1998a: 4; 132 in original). In other words, in reality, state socialism and liberal democracy are fluid and contradictory rather than unified concepts. Elements such as the open markets normally associated with a market economy, often covertly appeared in the economies of state socialism.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND IDEOLOGY: TWO MYTHS OF TRANSITION

An analysis of the nature of civil society and how it was constructed within different state formations under state socialism and during the transformation process will expose the extent to which women past and present have been politically active. This analysis will contextualize what we see as two contrasting 'myths of transition'. The first myth is that under state socialism, despite women's official political 'equality', they were politically inactive, lacking (as did men) a civil society space filled with the voices of democratic control. The second myth is that, following the fall of state socialism, women in Central and Eastern Europe rejected feminism, and indeed politics in general as 'dirty', and hence failed to take advantage of this opening and the opportunities it provided for increased political involvement. Both these analyses provide a simplistic and thus inaccurate picture of the period of transformation, which fails to take into consideration national and cultural differences. More substantively, they deny the actual existence of much grassroots activity both before and after 1989. In other words, they also retain 'traditional' notions of political activity, which define certain activities and sites of activity as political. The two 'myths of transition' have arisen partly from contesting notions of the position and project of feminist identities reflected in the continuing and difficult East/West feminist dialogue. As Duhaček points out 'How do we speak of feminism which is other *than* Western feminism, if not as a feminism which is the other to it, which would presuppose Western feminism as the parameter?' (Duhaček 1998a: 2; 129 in original; emphasis in original; see also Gapova 2001). Indeed those who challenge issues around which feminists have mobilized in the USA and the UK feel that they are being accused of 'attacking Western democracy itself' (Gapova 2001: 1).

The concept of 'civil society' has been used in liberal democratic political theory to define the space that exists between the state and the household in

a democracy (Keane 1988) and has come to be seen as synonymous with political activity or mobilization by citizens outside the governmental arena. In this definition, civil society becomes not simply a descriptive term for any type of activity beyond the power of the state and the 'unregulated' arena of the family, but a discourse of political resistance to the state enabled by a democratic society. The relationship between the state and the population under state socialism has consequently been analysed in terms of a 'lack' of this discursive space of civil society (Keane 1988). With far-reaching regulation of all aspects of social and economic life, the state was perceived as acting directly on the individual and the domestic sphere, unmediated by alternative institutions or spaces for greater political subjectivity and autonomy. All activity defined as 'political' was either under state control or vigorously policed. Peggy Watson (1997) points out that under state socialism, group struggles around issues such as equal pay and the position of women in society were seen as superfluous in a political system formulated around ideological principles of egalitarianism. Not only did this help the state to restrain potential dissident voices that may have challenged authority in traditional ways, it also prevented other formations such as informal welfare or voluntary service providers (Shaw 1995). The fact that most welfare and social care was in fact provided by the state was used to legitimize the absence of these groupings and obscured, or by implication eliminated, the need for provision of any alternative services. The rights to welfare, work and housing that formed the central core of citizenship definitions under state socialism were used to inhibit the individual's 'right' to mobilize politically in the meaning of the term under liberal democracy (Einhorn 1993). In addition, with the private sphere as the only alternative to state power, there was pressure to maintain solidarity within that sphere, and issues such as domestic violence remained invisible with little possibility for collective action. Thus the concepts of citizenship and civil society came to have different meanings under state socialism which influenced (and constrained) the political possibilities and collective identities that could form in this context and in its wake.

Under state socialism the concept of civil society became inextricably linked to that of political dissidence. The Central and Eastern European intellectuals Václav Havel, George Konrád and Adam Michnik theorized civil society as the location of 'antipolitics' where 'truth' and morality existed as the organizing principles of autonomous individuals (cited in Einhorn 1993). Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, the Hungarian Democratic Opposition and Solidarity in Poland, made the reinstatement of a space for autonomous activity a fundamental element of their challenge to Communism (Kaldor 1991). Their utilization of the discourses of liberal democracy was to influence greatly the political climate following 1989. In becoming *the* language of politics post-transformation, it would also come to define what constituted the greatly anticipated women's movements and thus the nature of and motivations for the activity and groups that did emerge.

Susan Gal and Gail Kligman note that:

> one general lesson of this global circulation of 'civil society' as a term and idea is that concepts with similar names do not always mean or describe similar things. Ideas from one historical and political era are routinely decontextualised by theorists and activists.
>
> (Gal and Kligman 2000a: 93)

As we shall see, the particular nature of the civil society 'created' by economic liberalization not only categorizes what it considers 'political', but affects the very formation of particular political identities and categories of mobilization. This process differs in the post-state socialist context from that of the neo-liberal market model with its anti-state bias as well as within different national contexts within the region itself. In Europe this difference is imbricated by a power dynamics where western social movements have defined the very nature of civil society activity such as women's movements as they are 'expected' to arise.[4]

GENDER AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The distinction between the public domain of politics as gendered male and the private sphere of the home as gendered female has operated historically to exclude women from the official policy making bodies of state power. Like that of the state, the public/political sphere of civil society is neither politically, ideologically nor gender neutral. As in all political activity it is a space structured by gendered relations of unequal power and its institutions – trade unions, religious institutions and dissident political movements – are male-dominated. Nonetheless, one of the fundamental goals of feminism in Western Europe and the USA has been to destabilize the boundary between the public and the private spheres in order to make visible the political nature of women's activity. 'The personal is political' has operated to valorize and shape the experiences of the private sphere, relating them both to systemic gender-based discrimination and to political identities. Traditionally, women's movements in the UK and the USA have utilized the supposedly (politically and gender) 'neutral' space of civil society for such emancipatory action. The 1999 UNICEF *Women in Transition* report states: 'In Western democracies, a broad-based women's movement has been the primary force in advancing women's equality, in part by putting and keeping equality issues on the public and political agenda' (UNICEF 1999: 101). The physical location of civil society activity, often in a local context has made it easier for women to combine this activity with domestic responsibilities. The history of women mobilizing in the voluntary sector in Western Europe (Shaw 1995) has consequently led to a feminist redefinition of what counts as political and where it occurs (Benn 1993). If involvement in non-state organizations is

considered political, then by definition so are the many group activities at the level of the local community that have historically been the domain of women. The material effects of this process have been to pull women's experiences and group identifications out of the private sphere, forcing them into the public domain in order for this 'politicization' to take place.

The leap from identifying social disadvantage as the result of a personal failing or individual situation to the identification of a discriminatory social arrangement is crucial to the formation of political identities (Acsády 1999). This will vary according to historical and cultural context. Women's groups are not always or necessarily set up to address an issue or issues that are universally held to have a 'gender interest'. Similarly, the moment at which a women's group (a group of women) becomes a 'feminist' group (addressing structural inequalities formed on the basis of gender difference) will also shift along these lines. A distinction needs to be made between single issue groups, which can be both practical and strategic, and broader movements for social change, which are generally strategic and identified as feminist (Molyneux, 1985). These definitions are crucial to the analysis of women's groups in Central and Eastern Europe, as they form the language by which we interpret women's political activities and group identities. The needs arising under different political regimes and social and historical contexts are different, as are the political identities assumed in order to address them (Acsády 1999). An analysis of these differences and the ideological power relationships that underpin them is essential in destabilizing the 'myths of transition'.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS UNDER STATE SOCIALISM

The emancipation of women was a key factor in state socialist ideology. The equality of men and women was seen as central to the success of the collective, and the levels of female participation in the labour market and mainstream politics under state socialism by far outstripped anything seen under liberal democracy. Top–down rule meant that there was no differential citizenship. Ideologically speaking, therefore, the power relations around social activity that are the reality of civil society's focus on the supremacy of the individual were invisible. Women on average formed around 30 per cent of parliamentarians and this figure was often higher in local government (Einhorn 1993). State-run 'umbrella organizations' such as the Women's League in Poland and women's branches of the Communist Parties were also formed in the name of 'full' emancipation as they called it. However, it has been widely recognized that the 'equality' resulting from these measures which was based on women's position as 'workers' was in fact nominal. The positions they held in the parliaments gave them little decision-making power in a political system which formulated policy and legislation almost exclusively at the level of the Party's Central Committees and Politburos, in which women had diminishing or invisible levels of representation (Einhorn

1993). The umbrella organizations too have been criticized for their adherence to strict party doctrine and lack of real power or independent voice. For example, the Democratic Women's Association of East Germany, which acted as a pressure group within parliament did not fight for the realization of women's rights, as these were already officially in place under the constitution. Its activities focused mainly on local and domestic 'women's' issues, and it did not have the support of the majority of adult working women (Einhorn 1993). These restrictions on women's 'true' political activity were compounded by what has been described as 'superwoman's' double or triple burden (Corrin 1992; Einhorn 1989: 296). Women were expected to be full-time workers and to bear the main responsibility for domestic duties and childrearing. This, combined with a system that identified them as also equally engaged in the process of politics resulted in high levels of physical and psychological exhaustion, rather than any feelings of genuine emancipation.

Under state socialism, elevating the private sphere to the locus of individual conscience made it a place of significant political action (Gal 1997). Groups such as informal aid networks in fact coexisted in many communities with official state-run groups. Although many of the dissident groups and 'antipolitics' movements were hostile to women, women did become involved in the movements of the 1980s. Women also ran the leading dissident newspaper and co-ordinated the underground cells of Solidarity in Poland (Tarasiewicz 1991; Duffy 2000). However they were rarely in positions of power or decision making, and their mobilization was almost never as 'feminists'. Women's political subjectivity was formed by a system that had already granted them formal equality, and thus rendered mobilization around 'women's issues' secondary to other political goals. However, women played a major role in the peace, human rights and environmental movements such as the Dialogue Group and the Danube Circle in Hungary, the Independent Peace Association in Czechoslovakia (Kaldor 1991) and Women for Peace in the GDR (Einhorn 1991).

Many feminists from Central and Eastern Europe have pointed out that much of the cynicism around women's true political power under state socialism has been strongly articulated by feminists in Western Europe and the USA as part of an ideological East versus West current (Gal and Kligman 2000b; Gapova 2001; Šmejkalová 2001). Despite the symbolic nature of women's involvement in the running of the state some women felt that their power to make decisions and choices, if not extensive under state socialism, was at least equal to those of men (Gal 1997). Issues that had mobilized feminists in Western Europe and the USA such as abortion, political representation, welfare and childcare, had not arisen in Eastern Europe, since top–down state socialist policy had granted women entitlements in these areas (Duffy 2000; Gapova 2001; Watson 2000). In these regimes, the family and the community and kinship networks of the private sphere fulfilled many of the roles that civil society plays in liberal democracy (Duhaček 1998a). Women gained considerable status and power through their central role in

these practically and strategically indispensable networks (Einhorn 1993, 1998, 2000b). This is in direct contrast to the strategy of the women's movement under liberal democracy, which concentrated on bringing 'domestic' issues into the public sphere of civil society in order to make them 'political'. Reworking the public/private divide in the context of transformation must therefore be analysed in the context of 'civil society' as an ideological construction of liberal democracy (Duhaček 1998a; Gapova 2001).

Women's movements under state socialism have therefore been hidden on two levels. First, this resulted from the absence of women organizing around notions of 'women's issues' established by women's movements in Western Europe and the USA. Second, the civil society activity that did occur was obscured by the authoritarian state that denied it the political language and legitimacy to articulate programmes and objectives (Gal 1997; Acsády 1999; Gapova 2001).

IMPACT OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

As we have seen, women had played a significant role in the struggle for political change throughout the 1980s. In the first free elections since 1945 women in some countries gained positions of 'real' political power (Jankowska 1991; Janova and Sineau 1992). New groups were formed to promote women's participation in the new political arenas and in the process of transformation. The Independent Women's Association (Unabhängiger Frauenverband – UFV) in the GDR for example, was an explicitly feminist group founded in December 1989. They demanded genuine equality of opportunity, equal pay and equal representation in political life, utilizing the slogan 'No Democracy without Us!' (Einhorn 1991, 1993; Maleck-Lewy 1997). Some groups, notably in Poland and Russia, were successors of the official women's councils that had existed under state socialism, for example the Women of Russia and the Free Association of Feminist Organizations in Poland (Posadskaya 1991; Fuszara 1997; Sperling 1999; UNICEF 1999). However these groups tended to be viewed with suspicion by the new autonomous movements. More explicitly 'feminist' groups emerged within the umbrella organizations and in the growing number of Women's and Gender Studies courses like those at the Humboldt University in Berlin, Warsaw University, the European Humanities University in Minsk or the Central European University in Budapest, and those of autonomous providers such as the Belgrade and Zagreb Women's Studies Centres (Dölling 1994; Grünell 1995; Bollag 1996; Daskalova 1997; Gaber 1997; Petö 1997; Duhaček 1998b; Kasić 2001).

The UNICEF MONEE report identifies four areas of women's civil society mobilization in the region during the 1990s. These were: political participation; the promotion of business and professional activities; social services such as health care and education; and activism against violence and peace work (see Table 1).

Table 1 Women's non-governmental organizations 1997–8

	Estimated number	*Area of activity*
Czech Republic	Unknown	Politics, social issues (education, refugees), health care, anti-violence, minorities, environment
FR Yugoslavia	Unknown	Anti-violence, marriage issues
Bulgaria	Unknown	Charity, family planning, legislative, lobbying groups
Romania	50	Women's equality, health care, education, professional groups, social issues
Russia	600	Politics, education, health care, anti-violence, business interests

Source: UNICEF 1999: 102.

The early surge of activism in Hungary, Poland and East Germany following 1989 quickly showed signs of suffering from hostility to feminism, activist burnout and political conflict, respectively (Jankowska 1991; Einhorn 1993). The movements began to take the form of small, single-issue, often professionalized campaigns in what Sabine Lang has called a process of 'NGOization of feminism' (Lang 1997). Organizations such as hotlines, shelters and abortion rights campaigns indicate a distinct rejection of the monolithic structures and universalized objectives characteristic of a broad-based women's 'movement'. These groups often defined their strategies in terms other than gender and rarely as feminist (Cockburn 1991a, 1998; Corrin 1996; Daskalova 2000; Grunberg 2000; Mršević 2000).

The lack of development of a 'feminist consciousness' filtering down to the wider population as a result of these initiatives has sometimes been perceived as a lack of gender consciousness and feminist political motivation. Early analyses focused on women's relegation to the private sphere in the face of the reintroduction of men's control in the public sphere and described how women were encouraged to see their gender interests as subordinate to the wider project of rebuilding democracy (Einhorn 1991; Funk and Mueller 1993). This constituted an ironic echo of the way in which they had in the past been encouraged to subordinate their individual needs and aspirations to the greater good of building socialism (Einhorn 1993). A new culture of individualism was introduced which abrogated the right to certain entitlements and made the ability to secure these rights contingent on other social factors/power relations. Many women, exhausted by the 'double burden' and influenced by the new ideologies of nationalism and capitalism, at least in the initial period, welcomed the discourse of a 'return to the home' and the opportunity to care for their families (although in fact economic necessity kept a high proportion of women in the labour market) (Einhorn 1993). The re-creation of national identities based on nostalgic ideals of femininity and

masculinity reinforced women's primary responsibility for the private sphere, thus restricting any collective action they potentially undertook within the discursive limits of the public/private, political/non-political divide.

The utilization of the idealized concept of civil society by dissident movements under state socialism turned to a preoccupation with state machineries. Indeed many of the men who had been at the forefront of these former dissident organizations went on to dominate the new institutions of power (Einhorn 1991). The new elites who emerged from the early Roundtable discussions swiftly took over and redefined the previous discourses of dissidence and social movements (Jaquette and Wolchick 1998). Women's issues were marginalized in the very movements that had been strengthened by the mobilization of women in the struggle against authoritarianism (Randall 1998). The incorporation of former (male) dissidents into the parliaments and the consequent valorization of state power over civil society, resulted in a civil society that was reinscribed in discourse as weak and secondary to the power of the new state. Some of the new political institutions even began to see civil society mobilization as a threat to their political power; thus Lech Walesa dismantled many of the citizen's committees just as the grassroots movements were gaining force[5]. This was compounded by hostility to the concept of gender equality as a political issue in popular discourse and the media (Acsády 1999; UNICEF 1999). Bound up with this was the state socialist legacy of the mental connection of politics and the state, which continued to engender a certain political apathy in the aftermath (Szalai 1990; Dölling 1991). Some women continued to see the domestic sphere, that had under state socialism held a position of the 'alternative' public sphere in which greater autonomy could be exercised, as a site of a political freedom untainted by state intervention (Duhaček 1998a). Thus as we discussed earlier, 'The personal is political' cry of feminists in Western Europe and the USA therefore sounded dangerously like inviting surveillance back into the home, and women were reluctant to invite legislative intervention into the domestic sphere (Drakulić 1992; Einhorn 1996).

Many women in the region were therefore open to other models that would solve their problems. A return to the ideal of the mother/eternal feminine provided just such a model (Janova and Sineau 1992), and in this way nationalist and traditional/religious ideals significantly influenced the nature of women's activism. Women's peace and environmental groups such as the Prague Mothers were based largely on what has been interpreted by many feminists from Western Europe as 'regressive' traditional images of femininity and motherhood as self-sacrifice (Bracewell 1996). In these groups women mobilized in the name of their children's health, or against the use of their sons and husbands as fighters in conflicts over which they had no control. In this capacity women were able to act in the public sphere where their traditional roles as mothers took on a more strategic and wider goal (Jaquette 1994). However, women's mobilization in these peace groups was also to a great extent co-opted by the state media and depoliticized precisely by the utilization

of these gender roles (Zarkov 1997; Lukić 2000). Tatiana Zhurzhenko has described how 'in the former socialist countries, emerging new identities are domesticated by the authorities and used by political elites for their own interests in order to manipulate new social movements' (2001: 30). Consequently, although a certain socialized gender identity became further entrenched, this did not transfer into a recognizable political identity and women in the region remained critical of what they saw as the individualistic and selfish nature of feminism in Western Europe (Kulczycki 1999).

There has also been a much vaunted 'lack of discourse' with which to describe the new political climate, given the inadequacy of the liberal democratic theory of civil society to describe the post-transformation environment. Underpinning this argument are discussions around the 'top–down' nature of emancipation under state socialism which suggest that political rights were 'given' rather than 'fought for' and hence were not recognized as rights until they were lost (Dölling 1991). In addition, there was prior to the transformation little sense of historical continuity in women's mobilizing in their own interests (Edmondson 1984), and it has taken some time to rediscover the pre-1945 traditions of active women's movements in the region (Petö 1997; Sperling 1999). Recent analysis has changed the focus from the presence or absence of women's issues, arguing that it is not so much a case of revealing the fact that women *were* in fact mobilizing after all, but rather of analysing how ideological discourses *produce and create* political movements and collective identities according to dominant and resistant political and social currents (Duffy 2000; Watson 2000). If feminism is a movement that has arisen according to specific historical and cultural contexts, then calling for a feminist 'movement' demanding particular political identities *in advance* of the creation of those identities is approaching the process from the wrong way round. This explains both the frustration and incomprehension on the part of some western feminists in the face of a perceived failure of women in Central and Eastern Europe to utilize civil society, and the antagonism of feminists from the region who are resentful of culturally inappropriate criteria (Šmejkalová 2001). Thus women in Central and Eastern Europe not only had a different diagnosis of the source of gender discrimination, but constructed their political identities along different axes to those in Western Europe. As Judit Acsády has noted 'Woman does not constitute a "we" group. This may be one of the reasons why women's self organising ... is still weak' (1999: 406). However, issues that may have mobilized western feminists may well in a different context contribute to the formation of other kinds of identity groups, in the face of the hardships and insecurity of the transformation process.

This debate masks a harsher reality behind women's grassroots organizing in this period. In both public and private domains, grassroots groups stepped in to fill the gap left when the welfare and social services previously provided by the state were either privatized or ruthlessly culled by the incoming regimes (Acsády 1999). These groups included charities, domestic violence

hotlines and information services, health care provision, services for alcoholism and poverty relief. Barbara Einhorn has described this as the 'civil society gap', or 'trap' where the new 'space' of civil society in fact served to take up the slack left by the retreat of the state in terms of the welfare and social provision under socialism (Dahlerup, 1994; Einhorn 2000b). A closer examination of the groups emerging in two countries of the region reveals how this has shaped women's political subjectivity and the shared goals and strategies around which they have mobilized. This will also illustrate how the specific historical and cultural constructions of civil society and political activity in the region have operated to dictate the formation of certain types of organizations and inhibit the identification of a widespread 'women's movement' or feminist politics at this time (Zhurzhenko 2001).

TRANSFORMATION TEN YEARS ON

An agenda of civil society activity for women has been promoted as an integral part of membership in the global world of politics and in market-driven societies. The result has been an explosion in networking and the formation of umbrella groups often across borders (see also Cohen and Rai 2000). Towards the end of the 1990s transnational women's networking was to become a key feature of women's mobilization all over the world (Ali *et al.* 2000). The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, both supported existing groups and encouraged new women's groups throughout the region. Not only did it provide a forum for networking and support among women's groups from all over the world, but it placed pressure on governments to implement measures for gender equality in signing the Beijing Platform for Action (UNICEF 1999: 101). The influential Network of East West Women (NEWW) was formed in 1990 by feminists from the USA and the former Yugoslavia, and has instigated networking and initiatives of feminists throughout Central and Eastern Europe as well as within individual countries. It now links forty countries and hosts an online network, a legal coalition and a book and journal project. In addition to 'sister-to-sister' networking, there were also the 'joint-venture' initiatives which channelled foreign funding, such as the United States–Newly Independent States (US–NIS) Women's Consortium and of course local groups who were receiving funding from foreign donor agencies and women's groups (Sperling *et al.* 2001: 1160). The Söros Foundation has been instrumental in supporting women's movements throughout the region, most recently through the Open Society Institute's Network Women's Programme set up in 1997 (Open Society Institute Network Women's Programme 2002). While there are many beneficial consequences of such networking, the discourses and availability of financial and other resources that resulted from international contacts and collaborations had major implications for the capacity, shape and objectives of women's groups. This interaction between feminist groups remains part of

the critical and continuing East–West dialogue that mediated the analysis and expectations for civil society activity in the early 1990s. Some have criticized the impact of foreign donor funding as distorting the activities of local-level women's NGOs, defining agendas and emphasizing management and efficiency (Lang 1997; Said Khan 2000; Cockburn *et al.* 2001: 166–7; Sperling *et al.* 2001). Once again, these factors indicate the need for a more nuanced picture of women's civil society mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe which would concentrate not only on the 'absence' of feminist mobilization. It would examine the detail of current activities and political positions, placing them against the complex background of the post-Cold War geopolitical context.

CASE STUDIES

Poland

In Poland, women had a long history of engagement in political activity and in the nineteenth century had set up their own group, the 'Enthusiasts' during the struggle for national independence. This was to influence much subsequent mobilization early in the twentieth century (Githens and McBride 1996: 56). Under state socialism, as in many other countries, there was a single women's organization, the Women's League which was closely connected to the Party. In the early 1980s, the relaxing of the state's control over independent mobilization, which allowed the rise of Solidarity, also engendered the first alternative women's groups. The first feminist group was established by students at Warsaw University, but women's first loyalty was to Solidarity and it was resistance to the state that was most important in forming political identity (Siemienska 1998). Although women had formed the Women's Section of Solidarity during the 1980s, the movement was essentially a male-dominated trade union with strong links to the Church. This meant opposition to reproductive rights, a strong emphasis on stereotypical masculine/feminine roles and the idealization of the traditional Polish family.[6]

Mobilization of women in Poland in the late 1980s and most of the 1990s was mediated by two interconnected elements. The first was the position of the Church in relation both to the incoming government and to the position of women in society, and the second was the wrangling over abortion that occurred throughout the 1990s. Polish society had historically been dominated by the existence of an extremely powerful Catholic Church. Despite state socialism's ideological antipathy towards religion and its vigorous suppression of alternative power structures, the regime was eventually forced to accept the Church's role in Polish society. The power struggles between the two institutions were to play a major role in the transformation. The Church reinforced a traditional image of Polish womanhood as that of the *Matka Polka* or Polish mother. Women were seen as the protectors of national

identity and were encouraged into a spirit of self-sacrifice for the homeland and the family (Titkow 1993). This image had not faded under state socialism as it had in other countries, due to the particular strength of the nationalist discourse, and it was adopted within an increasingly nationalist rhetoric with the emergence of Solidarity. Under state socialism, the Church had occupied a position often described as a 'civil society' institution in terms of its occupation of a space between the state and the private sphere. This placed it in direct conflict with Communist ideology on several important material and discursive levels (Fuszara 1993; Kulczycki 1999). Not only did it provide the only alternative power structure and opportunity for ideological group formation, but it had also taken up many welfare and social care roles not provided by the state.

No other institutions had the history, experience or infrastructure of the Church, which held significant material resources as well as networks of communication, publications and related organizations, and much has been made of the role it played in filling the political vacuum post-1989 (Githens and McBride 1996). In fact the Church did continue to fulfil many of the welfare roles it had performed before 1989, and also provided the guiding ideology of many initial political debates. But this 'take-over' of civil society space by the Church post-transformation did not prevent the formation of women's or feminist movements in civil society, as has sometimes been claimed. Rather, women's political energies were focused along differing lines and in different locations at this time such as caring for their families in an environment of increasing instability. It took the abortion debate, a situation which the Church and secular politicians in Poland argued was a 'test case' for democracy, and hence for the existence of civil society, to create the anticipated women's movements.

Many theorists have identified the abortion debate as being fundamental to the reconfiguration of political arenas following the fall of state socialism (Einhorn 1993; Titkow 1993; Kulczycki 1999; Fuszara 2000; Zielinska 2000). In 1989 a draft abortion law was submitted by the incoming government to restrict Polish women's access to abortion which they had held since 1956. Abortion proved a test case for the ability of different political forces to mobilize and engage in debate around government policy, and also gave them a framework within which to define various political and cultural standpoints. When the new legislation was first put forward in 1989 some thirty civil society women's groups were established in response to the new government's proposal. The Association for the Dignity of Women, the Feminist Association and Pro Femina organized demonstrations and the Women's Parliamentary Group was active in co-operating with these NGOs and in lobbying within parliament. However, the Church was in a strong position following its important role in the 1989 Round Table talks which ushered in political pluralism and the political actions of the newly formed women's groups were no match for its strength, influence and organization (Kulczycki 1999). Finally in 1993, a law was passed which outlawed abortion

except in cases such as rape and incest and imposed strict prison sentences on both the woman and her doctor.

Despite the creation of many groups and co-ordination around campaigns on the abortion issue, many of the new groups were less interested in 'strategic' gender interests than in addressing the practical problems of the new legislation (Siemienska 1998). Organizations such as the Assistance to Single Mothers Federation, Poznan and the St Joseph Foundation for Assistance to Single Mothers were involved in setting up shelters and hostels as awareness grew as a result of the parliamentary debates, of the material problems for many women. This led to an expansion of initiatives over women's bodily autonomy, such as those to combat trafficking (La Strada) and violence against women (the Beaten Wives Association in Bydgoszcz) and also the umbrella Federation for Women and Family Planning. The role of women's organizations in the abortion debate changed the discourse from that of morality, nationalism and democracy, to one of women's rights. As Małgorzata Fuszara puts it: 'paradoxically the anti-abortion draft helped women to create women's organizations and a women's movement in defense of their rights' (1993: 251). In other words, a political subjectivity for women as women was created and defined by the terms of this debate, which has simultaneously been credited with the definition of civil society. However, the abortion ban was fought as a socio-economic problem rather than as one of women's rights. As both Renata Siemienska and Małgorzata Fuszara have argued, the traditionalist/nationalist image of woman-as-mother-of-the-nation, together with the influence of the Church over civil society had the effect of silencing political debate on women's issues other than those linked to the family and reproduction (Fuszara 2000; Siemienska 1998).

Concentration on the struggle over the perceived empty 'space' of civil society and the domination of models of feminist activism in Western Europe that placed a strong emphasis on reproductive choice obscures the wider picture. There were in fact initiatives among women in Poland at this time which refused to be restricted to mobilization around reproduction, however politicized an issue this had become. Issues such as political representation and other structural inequalities were beginning to be addressed as part of a wider programme to combat women's general subordination. In 1989 the Polish Feminist Association was formally registered (although it had in fact been in operation since 1980), promoting ideas of feminism and equal rights, organizing seminars and conducting research and education programmes. In 1994 the Women's Rights Centre was set up to analyse legislation and monitor the Government's policy programmes with regard to the ratification of international agreements. The centre also provided legal assistance and training for the police and other officials on violence against women. The lobbying group Kobiety Tez (Women Too) held training sessions for prospective political candidates, leading to an increase in women's participation in local government after the 1994 elections.[7] This developed into a more permanent organization running seminars and providing assistance to women

involved in local politics. The Centre for the Advancement of Women organized vocational training and self-help groups and ran the Women's Labour Exchange (Fuszara 2001). The national women's documentation and information centre 'OŚKA' was a further important initiative established at this time. Other organizations were set up for professional women to improve their chances of promotion to high positions in enterprises and administration (Siemienska 1998).

The impact of these measures has undoubtedly been considerable. However links between these women's organizations and government have been problematic, illustrating the continuing influence of the Church in political activity. In 1995 the Forum for the Co-operation of the Government Deputy for the Family and Women's Issues and of Non-Governmental Women's Organizations was founded to evaluate and initiate policy. However, disagreements over the abortion issue led to organizations associated with the Catholic Church leaving the Forum, which in turn created a wider division within civil society organizations over the role of women and the focus of their political activity. In 1997 the new Cabinet led by Solidarity ended co-operation with the Forum and in recent years the lack of collaboration between the women's movement and the Government has deepened (Fuszara 2001).[8] In 1999 several NGOs joined together in the production of a report 'Gender Discrimination in Poland' in response to the Government's failure to co-operate with women's groups or engage with gender issues. Fuszara sees the current situation as sharing similar features to those occurring in West European and American societies in periods of centre to right wing governments (Fuszara 2001). In 1999 and 2000 initial attempts to introduce draft Equal Status legislation into the Sejm (parliament) were literally laughed out of court (Einhorn 2003 [1993]). This exemplifies what Einhorn has theorized as the civil society 'gap' whereby linkages between women's grassroots activity and state-level institutions, legislation and policy are either non-existent or inadequate.

A further influence on the nature of women's civil society activity at this time has been the growing dialogue around Poland's membership of the European Union. Joanna Regulska has pointed out how, despite the distinct 'gender blindness' of the enlargement debate itself, the new ideological discourses and priorities for financial resources have had an impact on the issues around which women's groups mobilize. On the one hand pressure from the EU to implement social and economic as well as legal measures for equality meant that women's groups have had much discursive 'armoury' with which to make their claims. However, this also had the potential to dictate the issues that would gain approval (and funding) from Brussels, and particular issues have been prioritized for attention such as measures to combat human trafficking, which is perceived by the countries of the EU as a growing immigration problem in view of future expansion (Regulska 2001).

In conclusion, like other countries in the region, women's issues in Poland have been largely perceived as selfish and individualist in the face of national turmoil (Kulczycki 1999). Here as elsewhere women developing political

subjectivities around their contextual needs, together with specific factors such as the move towards accession to the EU have resulted in a growing number of small single-issue groups responding directly to a need or problem (Fuszara 2001). This is combined with an awareness of the need to address perceived general patterns of gendered subordination and broader movements do become visible due to the networking and coalition-building strategies of these smaller groups. Associations such as the Polish branch of the Network of East West Women are active in co-ordinating political, economic and legal projects in relation to both the continuing environment of transformation and prospective EU accession.

Former Yugoslavia

Unlike Poland and many other countries in the region, the former Yugoslavia is a heterogeneous mix of cultures and ethnicities, with a significantly different experience of state socialism. This is reflected in the diversity of women's and feminist mobilization in the period following 1989. Although civil society mobilization in the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia) demonstrates features common to many of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe at this time, we also see the unique situation of a country torn apart by narrow ethnic nationalism. For reasons of space, this article focuses primarily on groups in Croatia and Serbia, with some reference to groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Yugoslavia had a flourishing feminist movement from the early 1970s which built on early women's movements formed to fight the Nazi occupation. Although the 'Anti-Fascist Women's Front of Yugoslavia' was in fact initiated by the Communist Party, it facilitated an initial move by women from private to public sphere where they gained posts in the Party and in local administration. Also significant in the development of women's movements in this context was Yugoslavia's relatively 'open' position during the period of state socialism with regard to travel, market deregulation and workers' self-management. The existence of this market economy pre-1989 brought with it significantly greater freedom to organize alternative movements in so-called 'civil society'. However, this also conversely proved to impose *restrictions* for women through the lack of equal labour force participation engendered by the market economy. Indeed, women in Yugoslavia made up a much smaller percentage of the workforce than they had done in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Morokvasić 1998). Mirjana Morokvasić has argued that in contrast to other countries in the region, in Yugoslavia an effective reintroduction of women into the private sphere was therefore already taking place during the period of state socialism, rather than becoming evident only at the time of transformation (see also Milić, 1993).

Nonetheless, women's activism and feminist voices had remained very much in evidence in Yugoslavia throughout the state socialist period and in

the transformation process. In 1987 the first all-Yugoslav Feminist meeting took place in Ljubljana, and three years later Yugoslav feminists organized a conference entitled 'I, You, She, for Us'. These meetings called for a greater focus on the position of women in society and politics. However, by the 1990 meeting, the shape of the movement was being significantly influenced by the rise of nationalism and approaching conflict, and issues of violence against women and nationalism were placed firmly on the conference agenda. As well as shaping the discussion, nationalist antagonisms among the participants also spilled over into the debates resulting in disharmony (Duhaček 1993), and thus, despite the fact that feminists from Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade had been working together for almost two decades, the divisive nature of conflicts over nationalism had begun to take their toll. In addition to the problems between women attendees, the 'I, You, She, for Us' meeting was also received with hostility in the mainstream media (Lukić 2000). Interestingly, a meeting of the non-feminist Council of the Women's Movement of Yugoslavia in February 1991 received better coverage. This meeting mainly involved women who had been officials of the Communist Party. Furthermore, participation was orchestrated to allow women from certain companies the time off work to attend (Lukić 2000), and it was consequently viewed with suspicion by many female activists who were sceptical of such overt state intervention.

In 1992, following the Vance-Owen peace agreement and two months before the start of the war in Bosnia, the Belgrade Women's Studies Centre, an NGO project originating from the group Women in Society, introduced its first course. Although the Women's Studies Centre took an anti-nationalist and anti-war stance it was accused of failing to include issues of war and nationalism and of adopting 'traditional' ideas of the role of feminist theory and academia (Duhaček 1998b: 3; 491 in original). Daša Duhaček has commented that 'one of the underlying immediate dilemmas was, how, in a time of war we could engage in an essentially peacetime activity', in other words, the study of feminist theory to a certain extent 'outside' the context of war (1998b: 3; 492 in original). In the period following 1989, women's political subjectivity in terms of feminism and of civil society activity more broadly, was in fact being increasingly mediated by the discourses and material conditions of war. The reconfiguration of nationalisms and the rediscovery of ethno-national identities suppressed by state socialism were key elements in this process. Ethno-nationalist discourse excluded women from political decision making and cast them largely as powerless victims of national struggles (Bracewell 1996; Korać 1996). This discourse which dictated women's role as the biological and social reproducers of cultural identity critically influenced their participation in political activity and the extent to which a 'women's movement' was formed at this time. Moreover, 'Because of the absolute domination of the Nation's interest, *any other, civilian, politically democratic*, peace making, and alternative strategy against the War itself is, at the very first step seen as "cowardly", "*unmanly*"' (Papić 1992, cited in

Duhaček 1998a: 6; 134 in original), emphasis in original). This was enforced by a vehement anti-feminism that portrayed the movement as disloyal to Yugoslavia (Drakulić 1993; Morokvasić 1998; Ugrešić 1998).

In July 1991 a gathering of parents concerned about the drafting of their children into the Yugoslav army broke into the Serbian parliament to demand that their children were sent back from the war in Slovenia. From this developed the *Wall of Love*, a movement across national boundaries of 'Mothers' Committees' in which parents campaigned for the return of their soldier-sons. One of the main actions of the *Wall of Love* was the organization of bus convoys to take women from all republics to the head quarters of the Yugoslav National Army in Belgrade (Zarkov 1997). However, once again, tensions over nationalism were inevitable. Some of the Women's Committees from Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia either failed to join in the demonstrations or were affected by internal divisions (Zarkov 1997). Ultimately, the political importance of this mass mobilization was understood better by the authorities than by the women themselves, and the convoys were in the end utilized in nationalist propaganda as justification for the creation of separate republican armies (Zarkov 1997: 313; Cockburn 1998; Lukić 2000).

The *Wall of Love* was neither a peace movement, nor was it feminist. First, many women were not against the war itself, but simply blamed it for the loss of their sons. Second, the use of motherhood as a 'moral basis for public demands' (Lukić 2000), largely obscured women as both political actors and as *individuals*. The weekly anti-war protests of the Belgrade group Women in Black from October 1991 provided a contrasting example. Women in Black transformed their mourning into a public rather than a private event, and rather than a personal statement, their position embraced all victims of the war, refusing to distinguish between 'our' victims and 'theirs'. Broadening the focus from the individual to the collective and strategic formed an important element in the redefinition of women's political activity and their use of the public sphere. Women in Black made their protests in silence, and were therefore challenging not only the actions of their government, but the nature of political discourse and the methods by which dissent is expressed. Non-violence was conceptualized as a *political* act of resistance and of 'feminist solidarity' and the group identified the important connections between the military violence and the increasing evidence of domestic violence that accompanied ethno-nationalist conflict. Unlike many other initiatives, Women in Black succeeded in fostering links across ethnic divides, with like-minded organizations forming in Sarajevo, Kosovo and elsewhere. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Women in Black groups have sprung up all over the world and groups in Israel, Italy, London, New York and Spain continue to organize their silent protests against militarization and conflict (Women in Black 1998, 2001).

A large number of small organizations and single issue campaigns also emerged at this time which tackled issues such as violence against women and the situation of female refugees. Like Women in Black these groups

outlined the links between violence in the family and violence in society as a whole, addressing the problem of rape in inter-ethnic conflict as well as the significant levels of domestic violence (Korać 1996). The SOS Hotline in Belgrade was founded in 1990 following similar initiatives in Zagreb and Ljubljana (Mladjenović and Matijasević 1996; Mršević 2000). The hotline took the form of a non-professional NGO and built a network of service providers such as social workers, lawyers, journalists, scientists and researchers. Zorica Mršević has described how 'their grassroots methods constituted a form of political action different from that customarily associated with "political action" in Serbia, yet appropriate to these years of radical change' (2000: 370). The Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence was founded in Belgrade in 1993 to work with women raped in war and survivors of domestic violence (Walsh 1998; Autonomous Women's Centre).

The material conditions facing women at a time of conflict and instability were a major factor in the fragmentation and local nature of mobilization, and the apparent de-politicization or lack of broad feminist strategy in women's civil society activity. However, the fragmentation of the larger movements into these smaller single-issue groups and service providers did not mean the failure to address strategic problems, gendered inequalities or other political questions. Rather the groups began gradually to expand their remits to include other areas of discrimination and formed networks with other service providers working in similar areas. For example, self-help groups and shelters for victims of violence against women often began to undertake counselling and rehabilitation activities. Their working processes often represented a contribution to democratization and overcoming destructive ethno-nationalist divides. The Medica Women's Therapy Centre (now Medica Women's Association) for example was set up in 1993 in Zenica to give rape victims treatment and care in a women-only environment. They insisted on working across ethnic-national boundaries and now have a ten-year history of integrative work in the pursuit of wider democratic change (Cockburn 1998; Cockburn *et al.* 2001). The Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence in Belgrade went on to establish the Women's Information Centre in 1999 to increase women's participation in civil society through provision of resources and networking. In Zagreb, women refugees formed Zena BiH (Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and continued the group on their return to Bosnia. The group's remit was then expanded to incorporate projects on income regeneration that aimed to address the structural inequalities that faced women refugees. Towards the end of the 1990s other groups such as B.a.B.e. (Be Active Be Emancipated) in Croatia have been established which have an explicit focus on women's human rights. Through lobbying, advocacy, monitoring and education programmes, B.a.B.e. addresses issues from violence and reproductive health to legislative change and political participation. The history of women's activism in the countries of the former Yugoslavia therefore seems to have been influenced only partially by the 'opening up' of civil society. Far more important in shaping women's political

subjectivity has been the political and social climate surrounding the ethno-nationalist conflicts and their influence on activism around pacifism and violence. Yet despite the appearance of a disparate group of largely issue-driven organizations, we have argued that these can in fact be interpreted in terms of an identifiable movement to address women's continued structural disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

Initial analyses of women's movements and civil society in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe attempted to explain a perceived reluctance or inability of women in these countries to utilize the newly opened democratic space of civil society to form a collective feminist movement. Such analyses depended on an assumption that where women's mobilization did occur, it was in the context of 'regressive' traditional roles, was concerned primarily with reproductive rights and was fragmented into small and non-ideological or non-feminist single-issue organizations. We have tried to illustrate not only that women before and after transformation were indeed mobilizing around strategic issues, but also that a closer scrutiny of the meanings and ideologies attributed to the very concept of civil society and those who utilize it must be undertaken. The opportunities that arose from democratization created specific political identities according to the historic and cultural context of the transformation process in the region. Thus to speak of a unified 'civil society space', which appeared post-1989, and shared the same features as a corresponding 'space' in the liberal democracies of Western Europe, is fundamentally flawed. Likewise the concept of feminist movements and strategies needs to be understood in terms of the ideological position of those who predict their formation. The 'women's movement' in Central and Eastern Europe, like the development of liberal democracy there, will not be the same as in the countries of Western Europe or the USA. It should not be overlooked that many women's groups in Western Europe and the USA are also single-issue, lobbying campaigns, and not necessarily 'feminist' groups. The formation of political identities and the development of democratic structures has been largely universalized and taken outside of its social and historical context due to the strength of western capitalist ideology. The reality of 'civil society' is that it does not serve to protect the population from state power when the embodiment of that state power is a capitalist economy (Lang 1997). Nor does it protect participants from gendered discourses, cultural practices and social structures. If political participation in the traditional sense combines the will to act beyond one's own self-interests with the belief that this action has the power to change social structures, then it has been the disillusionment with democracy's ability to solve the problems of poverty and powerlessness, rather than any state socialist legacy, that has contributed to women's lack of participation (Duffy 2000).

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Notes

1 Local authors in each region were commissioned to conduct empirical studies and to write reports on their findings. In the case of Central and Eastern Europe, a report was produced on gender and civil society in Poland. This article is based on the findings of this report together with the most up-to-date secondary sources, both from within and outside the region, available when the article was completed.
2 They constitute up to 64 per cent of the unemployed, and a high percentage of those living in poverty (Lazreg 2000: 3; see also Lokar 2000; UNICEF 1999).
3 Barbara Einhorn has argued – with others – in favour of the term 'transformation' rather than 'transition' in the case of the changes in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989. She resists the more commonly used term 'transition', which implies a single, known and positive outcome and is thus ideologically loaded. The use of the term 'transformation' indicates a departure from western notions of a historical progression from state socialism to liberal democracy (Einhorn 2000a).
4 There is continuing internal debate on the nature of a 'feminist philosophy' in Central and Eastern Europe which is severely limited by the linguistic diversity of the region (Duhaček 1998a).
5 We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for raising this point.
6 The Women's Section was eventually dissolved in 1991, as documented by the former Women's Officer for Solidarity, Małgorzata Tarasiewicz (1991).
7 Although the activities of Kobiety Tez have undeniably led to an increase in political consciousness among candidates, journalists and some elements of the public, one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper noted that there is a lack of data to indicate a direct link between the group's activities and the rise in numbers of female elected officials.
8 It must be pointed out that there have been some positive examples of collaboration between women's groups and the state. This has largely been through the contracting of groups such as the Centre for the Advancement of Women and OSKA by state bodies to conduct specific activities.

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