

CHAPTER 2

LIKE A MIRROR IMAGE

Reflections of macro changes in the everyday lives of women and men

1. INTRODUCTION

As shown in the previous chapter, and similar to other post-communist countries, economic and political changes in all countries included in the survey led to changes in GDP, employment and real wages. Both economic development and the level of employment are closely connected to the level of privatization and the level of foreign investment, as well as to the direct or indirect impact of war, i.e. the intensity of that impact. The combination of severe recession and deeply flawed tax systems led to a large decline in government revenues as well. Although, because the communist state was so costly, the revenue decline was not a bad thing in itself, it had several quite negative consequences. First, it impaired the functioning of vital state institutions and made reform of institutional arrangements extremely difficult (UNICEF, 1999:9). It also led to the abolition of many social benefits, subsidies and services as well as to continual increases in taxes. And finally, one of the consequences of economic recession and punitive tax systems and costly and corrupted bureaucratic procedures was the growth of the informal sector and its associated labor markets. The growth of the informal sector (both 'shadow' and illegal economy) was a prominent feature of the transition economies of all countries included in the survey. However, it was especially apparent in connection to UN economic sanctions imposed on Serbia, which prevented trade and financial transactions with other countries, opening a large space for illegal activities, including organized crime. It especially generated fuel and weapons trade and foreign currency transactions, in Serbia as well in other countries included in the survey as Serbia's immediate neighbors (Bolcic, 1995:87). Transition from communism was also followed with an enormous increase in traditional crime, especially property crime and violence, with an additional impact of war on the increase of crime in Serbia.

All the above-mentioned macrosocial changes had a strong impact on people's everyday lives. Macro trends are internalized as personal problems, so that individual women and men who confront problems in their everyday lives reflect social changes in a microcosmic snapshot (Huber, 1991:21). Although this impact is unique in a similar way as the historical context of post-communist societies is unique, it shares some features with changes in everyday life and gender relations in

other societies which were also faced with some kind of social transformation or crisis (see Karstedt, 1993; Matsakis, 1996; Moeller, 1993).

In this chapter I will look at the ways macrosocial changes are mirrored in the everyday lives of women and men, i.e. in which ways the social and economic situations of individual women and men has been changed in post-communist societies. Identification of different patterns of changes to which individual women and men are exposed is crucial for understanding changes in gender identities and women's vulnerability to violence. However, although useful for getting an abstract idea about the nature of changes, statistics, i.e. quantitative data, are not sufficiently comprehensive to get a complete picture of different patterns of change faced by individual people. For example, it is crucial that we know about both the formal and informal employment structure within the family, i.e. whether a wife or husband, both of them or neither works and provides for the family. Also, in households with adult children, it is important that we learn about their employment status or problems in finding jobs as well as about concrete manifestations of changes in their financial situations and living standards.

Thus, in this chapter I will try to look more closely at translations of macro level changes in the everyday lives of people, relying in large measure on interviews with women and men in Hungary, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia as well as on the other qualitative material, and only sporadically on quantitative data. Using life course perspective, I will turn to the last ten years of changes in men's and women's socio-economic situation, quality of life, living standard and housing as well as to their everyday life changes connected to the war. Afterwards, in the chapters which follow this one, I will examine how socio-economic and war-connected changes in the everyday lives of people affect gender identities, power relations and relationships within and outside the family as well as women's vulnerability to violence.

2. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

2.1 (Un)employment and changes in distribution of economic power

After several decades of a planned economy and full (Soviet model) or high (Yugoslav model) employment policy, the emergence of significant unemployment in the post-communist period is a relatively new phenomenon in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. The number of registered unemployed grew from about one million in 1989 (mostly in the southern states of communist Yugoslavia, such as Macedonia and Serbia) to eight or nine million by 1993-94 following the first wave of economic reforms. Three quarters of these people were registered in Central Europe and in the Balkans. The countries included in my survey, with the exception of Serbia, had the greatest decline in employment in the period between 1989-1997 in comparison to all other post-communist countries, with Macedonia and Hungary

having the highest loss of jobs (33 and 30 percent respectively) and Bulgaria in the next highest group of countries with a 25 percent decline. As pointed out by Jakimovski, in the period between 1992 and 1995, Macedonia recorded a significant increase in people who lost the jobs and pensioners who were forced to retire before retirement age, as well as a decrease in new jobs. (Jakimovski, 1998:12). Thus, similar to the consequences of unemployment for people in the pre-retirement stage in Western countries, "the pre-retirement phase may well become a retirement reality for many as a result of the increasing redundancy rate." (Cohen, 1987:27).

In comparison to other countries, FR Yugoslavia and Serbia, as a part of it, had a moderate decline in registered employment (15%) (UNICEF, 1999:7-8). These differences are mainly connected to the differences in the level of privatization and state factory restructuring, which, as mentioned above, were the least developed in Serbia and the best developed in Hungary, among the countries included in the survey. Also, although in Hungary steady economic recovery has been under way for some time, the unemployment rate still stayed very high. However, while these well-known and tremendous shifts are frequently identified with the "social costs" of the transition process, less well known is the rise in self-employment, which more than doubled in most post-communist countries (Earle and Sakova, 2000: 588).

However, the gender gap in labor force participation does not appear to have widened considerably. Thus, both women's and men's participation in the labor force has decreased. Also, the financial pressure to maintain two incomes in a household remains tremendous, constraining women and men to continue to work or to search for work. Due to high pre-transitional employment rates, the share of women employed remains in the 40-50% range. For example, in 1997, among countries included in my survey, there was a slightly (by 4%) higher female unemployment rate only in Serbia. In Bulgaria, male and female unemployment rates were almost the same, while in Hungary and Macedonia male unemployment slightly exceeds the female. (UNICEF, 1999:28; UNDP, 1999:39).

Although there is little evidence that women are being largely removed from formal employment, it seems that the tensions created because of the need to care for children and the need to work for pay have grown, especially since that flexible options for reconciling these commitments, such as part time jobs, are still mostly unavailable (UNICEF, 1999:40). It also seems that in practice unemployment affects women in a greater proportion than official statistics show. As stressed by Toth, many women opted for early retirement in order to avoid unemployment.²⁷ Also, many women, who are currently on maternity leave or childcare benefit may find themselves unemployed after benefits run out (Toth, 1997:70). Also, much of the reduction in women's economic activity has occurred among younger and older age groups. In general, available statistical data show that finding a job is particularly hard for young people as well as that youth unemployment rates are often higher than the average in well-established market economies (UNICEF, 1999:29). Thus it seems that age is more important than gender as a determining factor for labor force

²⁷ It is especially characteristic for women who lost a job after the age of 40, when they are usually not able to find a new one without retraining. However, as they become closer to retirement age, they are less ready for retraining (Gabriella Nemeskesy, interview, 1999).

reduction (Stenhilber, 2001:203). However, some evidence also suggests that employers, when reducing working hours or forcing workers on administrative leave, tend to focus on women while keeping more men full-time. In addition, for newly created employment, it has been observed that sectors and professions previously considered "female" are now becoming more mixed (Knothe, 1999, quoted by Steinhilber, 2001:203). Also, as stressed by many of my interviews, and as noticed in Western countries as well, the impact of unemployment is most keenly felt by those at the very early or very late stages of their careers (Cohen, 1987:26).

The available data show that in 1996/97 women earned less than men on average, with the gender gap ranging from 10 to 30%, rates comparable to, or smaller than, those in Western countries. However, only Bulgaria reports a large increase in the gender pay gap between 1990 and 1997. The data suggest that in some (mainly most developed) countries, including Hungary, since the introduction of reforms there has been a considerable narrowing in the gender pay gap, while ratios for FRY, i.e. Serbia, are relatively stable. It appears that significant occupational segregation by gender continues to exist in the region. During the transition, gender segregation is also becoming based on the ownership structure of enterprise, with women continuing to cluster in public sector jobs, and men being much more present in private sector employment (UNICEF, 1999:40). Having in mind that public jobs are paid significantly less, this has a serious negative impact on women's economic position during transition. However, although women "appear to be less inclined or able than men to move into self-employment and entrepreneurship - a vital part of the new private sector in many cases women already have strong a position in the private sector" (UNICEF, 1999:33-40), and the trend for those employed in the private sector is growing (UNDP, 1998:8). However, as pointed out by Steinhilber:

"While men tend to dominate the newly privatized large-scale enterprises, women seem to have benefited relatively more from employee buy-outs and voucher privatization. Women have created fewer businesses than men, own smaller businesses, employ less people and do not engage in international activities to the same extent as men's companies" (Losowska, 1999, quoted by Steinhilber, 2001:208)

Another phenomenon which appears in transition countries is sham presidency of women, while the companies are run by their husbands (Kotzeva, 1999:8). According to research findings, two thirds of unpaid workers in Bulgaria are women who work unregistered in family businesses run by their husbands. Although they work very hard, they do not have any kind of insurance and are economically dependent on their husbands (Netkova, interview, 1999). Also, as mentioned by Jovanovic, women in Macedonia most often run small shops located within their own house or building where they have a flat, so that they can easily combine domestic chores and work (interview, 1999). In Bulgaria, most of the women-run companies deal with some kind of family business that is regarded as a way of supporting the family. These businesses are low-profit and slowly developing (Kotzeva, 1999:8). Also, it seems that, at least in Serbia but most probably in other countries as well, younger people (below 40) are more represented among those

employed in private sector and private owners, while those over 40 dominate among state firms' employees (Milic, 1995:159).

Employment (informal and formal jobs) related problems and the economic difficulties as a whole seem not to be evenly spread among the representatives of the various ethnic and religious groups. They had particular effects on Roma people in all countries, and, in Bulgaria, on Bulgarian Muslims and Turks as well (UNDP, 1998:20). During the last ten years the growing social exclusion of these groups led to a new form of ethnic inequality and generated new kinds of social tensions and conflicts in Bulgaria. The threat of ethnic discrimination and abuse has become an everyday phenomenon for representatives of these minorities. As highlighted in the 1998 UNDP development report the two largest ethnic minorities (Turks and Roma) are among the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in Bulgaria. Children and women within these ethnic minorities are especially insecure, as they are subjects of both intra- and intergroup violence.

Also, there are differences between Albanians and non-Albanians both in Macedonia and Serbia (Kosovo). In Macedonia, for example, Albanians, both women and men, participate less in the labor force than Macedonians. While Albanian men often go to work abroad by themselves, leaving their families alone, or are involved in informal/illegal activities, Albanian women, following a strong patriarchal tradition, stay at home, or are unable to find employment due to the lack of education (Jovanovic, interview, 1999).²⁸ Similar behavior is seen among Kosovo Albanians (Report of Helsinki Human Rights Committee, 2000:9).

Although useful for understanding changes in the economic positions of women and men in post-communist countries, statistics on employment are far from giving a complete picture about it, let alone about the impact of employment changes on relationships within the family. In transitional countries being formally employed does not necessarily mean being paid for work, or that salaries are paid on time or that pay is sufficient to provide economic security at all (Prokovik, 1998:125). As a result, data on registered employment do not always give an accurate picture about the actual level of people's economic activity. For various reasons, registered unemployment is a poor indicator of the actual level of unemployment as well. Thus, some registered unemployed may in fact be economically active. Many people find either a primary or additional (second) job within the informal sector which, together with its associated labor markets, is growing in many transition economies. Not so rarely, the informal sector offers better paid jobs than the formal one and a section of the population earns significant additional income from such activities (UNDP, 1998a: 4). However, evidence on the hidden labor market and incomes derived from it is difficult to obtain.

In Hungary, for example, it is often estimated that one third of GDP is realized within the informal economy (Frey, 1998:7). One of rare study is a survey undertaken at the beginning of 1998 in Belgrade (Serbia). According to the survey findings, 30 percent of employees were engaged in unregistered labor market

²⁸ Earlier, Albanian girls used to leave primary school after finishing the fourth year. This was the way of the traditional family to keep them in the home. However, more recently, more and more girls, especially in urban areas, continue education and try to find employment (Coneva, interview, 1999).

Social Change, Gender and Violence
Post-communist and war affected societies
Nikolic-Ristanovic, V.
2002, XXII, 196 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-1-4020-0726-2