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Women in Transition From Post Feminism to Past Femininity

By Dr. Sam Vaknin

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"[In]... the brothels off Wenceslas Square, in central Prague, [where] sexual intercourse can be bought for USD 25 – about half the price charged at a German brothel... Slav women have supplanted Filipinos and Thais as the most common foreign offering in [Europe]." (The Economist, August 2000, p.18)

"I'm also wary of the revolutionary ambition of some feminist texts, with their ideas about changing present conditions, having seen enough attempted utopia's for one lifetime" (Petr Průhoda, The New Presence, 2000, p. 35).

"As probably every country has its Amazons, if we go far back in Czech mythology, to a collection of Old Czech Legends, we come across a very interesting legend about the Dívín castle (which literally means 'The Girls' Castle'). It describes a bloody story about a rebellion of women, who started a vengeful war against men. As the story goes, they were not only capable warriors, they had no mercy and would not hesitate to kill their fathers and brothers. Under the leadership of mighty Vlasta, the "girls" lived in their castle, "Dívín", where they underwent a severe military training. They led the war very successfully, and one day Vlasta came up with an shrewd plan, how to take hostage a famous nobleman, Ctirad. She chose the lovely Sárka from the body (sic!) of her troops and had her tied up to a tree by a road with a horn and a jar of a mead out of her reach, but in her sight. In this state, Sárka was waiting for Ctirad to find her. When he actually really appeared and saw her, she told him a sad story of how the women from Dívín punished her for not following their ideology by tying her to the tree, mockingly putting a jar and a horn (so that she would be always reminded that she is thirsty and helpless) near by. Ctirad, enchanted by the beautiful woman, believed the lure and untied her, and when she handed him the mead, he willingly drunk it. When he was drunk already, she let him blow the horn, which was a signal for the Dívín warriors to capture him. He was then tortured in many horrible ways, at the end of which, his body was woven into a wooden wheel and displayed. This event mobilized the army, which soon afterwards destroyed Dívín. (Very significantly, this legend is the only account of radical feminism in Czech Lands.)" ("The Vissicitudes of Czech Feminism" by Petra Hanáková)

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"We myself...and many others are not in search of global sisterhood at all, and it is only when we give up expecting it that we can get anywhere. It is each other's very 'otherness ' that motivates us, and the things we find in common take on greater meaning within the context of otherness. There is so much to learn by comparing the ways in which we are different, and which the same elements of women's experience are global, and which aren't, and wondering why, and what it means" (Jirina Siklová)

"It is difficult to carry three watermelons under one arm." (Proverb attributed to Bulgarian women)

"The high level of unemployment among women, segregation in the labour market, the increasing salary gap between women and men, the lack of women present at the decision making level, increasing violence against women, the high levels of maternal and infant mortality, the total absence of a contraceptive industry in Russia, the insufficiency of child welfare benefits, the lack of adequate resources to fund current state programs – this is only part of the long list of women's rights violations."

(Elena Kotchkina, Moscow Centre for Gender Studies, "Report on the Legal Status of Women in Russia")

Communism was men's nightmare and women's dream, or so the left wing version goes. In reality it was a gender-neutral hell. Women under communism were, indeed, encouraged to participate in the labour force. An array of conveniences facilitated their participation: day care centres, kindergarten, daylong schools, abortion clinics. They had their quota in parliament. They climbed to the top of some professions (though there was a list of women-free occupations, more than 90 in Poland). But this – as most other things in communism – was a mere simulacrum.

Reality was much drearier. Women, however mettlesome, groaned under the "triple burden" – work, marital expectations cum childrearing chores and party activism. They succumbed to the lure and demands of the (stressful and boastful) image of the communist "super-woman". This martyrdom – now threatened by the dual Western imports, capitalism and feminism – served as a fountain of self-esteem and a source of self-worth in otherwise gloomy circumstances.

Yet, the communist inspired workplace revolution was not complemented by a domestic one. Women's traditional roles – so succinctly summarized by Bismarck with Prussian geniality as "kitchen, children, church" – survived the modernizing onslaught of scientific Marxism. It is true that power shifted within the family unit ("The woman is the neck that moves the head, her husband"). But the "underslippers" (as Czech men disparagingly self-labeled) still had the upper hand. In short, women were now subjected to onerous double patriarchy, both private and public (the latter propagated by the party and the state). It is not that they did not value the independence, status, social interaction and support networks that their jobs afforded them. But they resented the lack of choice (employment was obligatory) and the parasitic rule of their often useless husbands. Many of them were an integral and important part of national and social movements throughout the region. Yet, with victory secured and goals achieved, they were invariably shunned and marginalized. As a result, they felt exploited and abused. Small wonder women voted overwhelmingly for right wing parties post communism.

Yet, even after the demise of communism, Western feminism failed to take root in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The East Coast Amazons from America and their British counterparts were too

ideological, too Marxist, too radical and too men-hating and family-disparaging to engender much following in the just-liberated victims of leftist ideologies. Hectoring, overly-politicized women were a staple of communism – and so was women's liberation. Women in CEE vowed: "never again".

Moreover, the evaporation of the iron curtain lifted the triple burden as well. Women finally had a choice whether to develop a career and how to balance it with family life. Granted, economic hardship made this choice highly theoretical. Once again, women had to work to make ends meet. But the stifling ethos was gone.

Communism left behind it a legal infrastructure incompatible with a modern market economy. Maternal leave was anywhere between 18 and 36 (!) months, for instance. But there were no laws to tackle domestic or spousal violence, women trafficking, organized crime prostitution rings, discrimination, inequality, marital rape, date rape and a host of other issues. There were no women's media of any kind (TV or print). No university offered a gender studies program or had a women's studies department. Communism was interested in women (and humans) as means of production. It ignored all other dimensions of their existence. In sputnik-era Russia, there were no factories for tampons or sanitary bandages, for example. Communism believed that the restructuring of class relations will resolve all other social inequities. Feminism properly belonged to the spoiled, brooding women of the

West – not to the bluestockings of communism. Ignoring problems was communism's way of solving them. Thus, there was no official unemployment in the lands of socialism – or drugs, or AIDS, or unhappy women. To borrow from psychodynamic theories, Communism never developed "problem constancy".

To many, women included, communism was about the perversion of the "natural order". Men and women were catapulted out of their pre-ordained social orbits into an experiment in dystopy. When it ended, post communism became a throwback to the 19th century: its values, mores and petite bourgeois aspirations. In the exegesis of transition, communism was interpreted as an aberration, an interruption in an otherwise linear progress. It was cast as a regrettable historical accident or, worse, a criminal endeavour to be vehemently disowned and reversed.

Yet again women proved to be the prime victims of historical processes, this time of transition. They saw their jobs consumed by male-dominated privatization and male-biased technological modernization. Men in the CEE are 3 times more likely to find a job, 60–80% of all women's jobs were lost (for instance in the textile and clothing industries) and the highest rates of unemployment are among middle aged and older women ("unemployment with a female face" as it is called in Ukraine). Women constitute 50–70% of the unemployed. And women's unemployment is probably under-reported. Most unrecorded workers (omitted from the official statistics) are women. Where retraining is available (a rarity), women are trained to do computer jobs, mostly clerical and low skilled. Men, on the other hand, are assigned to assimilate new and promising technologies. In many countries, women are asked to waive their rights under the law, or even to produce proof of sterilization before they get a job. The only ray of light is higher education, where women's participation actually increased in certain countries. But this blessing is confined to "feminine" (low pay and low status) professions. Vocational and technical schools have either closed down entirely or closed their gates to women. Even in feminized professions (such as university teaching), women make less than 20% of

the upper rungs (e.g., full professorships). The tidal wave of the rising cost of education threatens to drown this trend of women's education. Studies have shown that, with rising costs, women's educational opportunities decline. Families prefer to invest – and rationally so – in their males.

Women witnessed the resurgence of nostalgic nationalism, neo traditionalism and religious revival – social forces which sought to confine them to home, hearth, spouse and children and to "liberate" them from the "forced labour" of communism. Negative demographic trends (declining life expectancy and birth rate, numerous abortions, late marriage, a high divorce rate, increasing suicide rate) conspired to provoke a "we are a dying nation" outcry and the inevitable re-emphasis of the woman's reproductive functions. Fierce debates about the morality of abortion erupted in bastions of Catholic fundamentalism (such as Poland and, to a lesser degree, Lithuania) as well as in citadels of rational agnosticism, such as the Czech Republic. Curiously, prostitution and women trafficking were accepted as inevitable. Perhaps because they catered to masculine needs.

Indeed, in feminist lore and theory, both nationalism and capitalism are "patriarchal". Nationalism allocates distinct and mutually exclusive roles to men and women. The latter are supposed to act as homemakers and have babies. Capitalism encourages the formation of impregnable male elites, disseminates new technologies mainly to male monopolies, eliminates menial and low skilled (women's) jobs and puts emphasis on masculine traits such as aggression and competitiveness. No wonder female political representation in parliaments and governments diminished dramatically since 1989. When powerless, under communism, CEE parliaments were stacked with women. Now that they are more potent elected bodies, they are almost nowhere to be seen. The few that infiltrated these august institutions are relegated to "soft" committees (social issues, usually) devoid of budgets and of

influence. It is very much like under communism when the decision making party echelons were predominantly male. The only influential women then were dissidents but they seem to have rejected the fruit of their labour, democracy, in favour of tranquility and peace of mind – or to have been usurped by an emerging male establishment. Despite an education in economics, they are under-represented among business executives, the owners of privatized enterprises and the beneficiaries of favourable pay regulations and tax systems.

This erosion of their economic base coupled with the drastic decreases in child benefits, in the length of maternal leave, in the number of public and, thus, affordable child care facilities and in other support networks led to a swift deterioration in the social status and leverage of women. With their only effective contraceptive – abortion – restricted, maternal mortality exploded. So did teenage pregnancy – a result of the curtailing or absence of sex education. The rate of sexually transmitted diseases went through the roof. Violence against women – rape, spousal abuse, date rape – became epidemic. So did skyrocketing street prostitution. Widowed women – an ever more common phenomenon in CEE – are destitute and reduced to begging as the pensions of the lucky ones are ground to nil by a rising cost of living and IMF prodded stinginess. There are also more quotidian problems (often neglected by the media hungry and soundbite craving feminists) like pitiful divorce maintenance payments or decrepit maternity wards in crumbling hospitals.

Yet, women's reaction to all this was notable in its absence. After decades of forced activism and imposed altruism, the imported Western individualism mutated in CEE to malignant egotism. A sliver of

the female population did well in local government and as entrepreneurs. The rest (especially the old, the rural, the less educated) stayed at home and seemed to fancy this novel experience of dependence. A generational divide emerged. Younger women discovered the joys of conspicuous consumption and mind numbing pop "culture". They constituted the masses of career opportunists, the new managerial class, shareholders and professionals – a pale imitation of the yuppies of America. Older women retreated – heaving a sigh of relief – into home and family, seeking refuge from the intrusion of tedious public matters. Economic realities still forced them to seek a job and steady income (often in a family business or in the informal economy, with no job security or regulated labour conditions) but their activism vanished into newfound and demonstrative reclusiveness.

Yet, even the young entrepreneurs often fare badly. They lack the necessary business skills, the knowledge, the supportive infrastructure, or the access to credit. The older women cannot work long hours, lack skills and, when officially employed, are expensive, due to the burden of the still effective social benefits. Thus, women can be mostly found in services, light industry and agriculture – the most non lucrative sectors of the dilapidated economies of CEE. And speaking of the social benefits not yet axed – their quality has deteriorated, access to them has been restricted and supplies are often short. The costs of public goods (mainly health and education) have been transferred from state to households either officially (a result of the commercialization of services) or surreptitiously and insidiously (e.g., patients required to purchase their own food, bed sheets and medication when hospitalized).

To blame it all on a botched transition is now in vogue. Yet, many of the problems facing the wretched women of CEE were evident as early as 30 years ago. The feminization of poverty is not a new phenomenon, nor is the feminization of certain professions and the attendant decline in both their status and their pay. Under communism, women felt as exhausted and as guilt-ridden as they feel today. They were considered unreliable workers (which they were, what with a lifetime average of 10 abortions and 2 children). Their offspring endured an alienated childhood in the brutal and faceless gulag of day care centres maintained by indifferent bureaucrats. Juvenile delinquency, a high divorce

rate, single motherhood and parasitic fathers were all swept under the ideological carpet by communism. Even communism's only achievement – the inclusionary workforce – was an elaborately crafted illusion for consumption by wide-eyed Western intellectuals. In the agrarian societies which preceded communism, women worked no less. And women were not allowed to work night time or shifts or in certain jobs, nor were they paid as much as men in equal functions. Job advertising is sex-specific and sexist to this very day (in stark violation of dead letter Constitutions).

Discarding the baby with the leaking bathtub has been a hallmark of transition. Communism has done a lot for women (one of its very rare achievements). Some of these foundations were sound and durable and should have been preserved to build upon. Yet the apathy of women and the zeal of power hungry men converged to yield an old new world: patriarchal, discriminatory and iniquitous. The day of CEE feminism will come. But first, CEE has to become more Westernized.

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Clothes For Women Who Love Casual Womens Clothing

By Bowe Packer

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Today women love dressing casual because it suits their fast paced and changing lifestyle, this is why womens casual clothing is here to stay. They want to feel good about themselves and their femininity, but at the same time be able to do everything their life demands of them while looking good and feeling comfortable. Many things are nearly impossible to do in formal dress apparel. Clothing manufactures and distributors are now seeing that casualwear is not just a fad and are offering a line of casual wear for all to choose from. Clothing stores online are fast recognizing this dress style and offering the right flare in their line of casual clothing for women.

Women want that built-in comfort factor, but with the right style, look and flare in their casual clothing. As we can look around and see, womens casualwear is not a thing of the past, but a growing and lasting line of clothes for clothing stores to offer to women.

Women love the idea of simplicity with a style, which is what casual wear for women has to offer. They love the idea that they can throw something on and wear it all day whether they are a stay at home mom or a working mother. It is not un-heard-of for women to be working, rushing around picking up the kids, going grocery shopping and transporting kids to sports practice. casual clothing should be designed and built for this fast paced, sometimes never ending world. Clothing stores need to continue to recognize and deliver the casualwear goods.

Women's fashion has certainly changed forever after World War II Because of the shortage of fabrics during and after the war, surplus fabrics like cotton and denim were used for the first time in women's fashion and casual clothing. A drastic change from the way womens fashion was up until this point. And this is what began the American propensity towards casual wear for women, which still shows up today throughout clothing stores around the world. Womens casual is fast becoming the overriding criteria when choosing comfortable clothes. For women it is all about the comfort they reap when wearing casual clothing that today's clothing stores are finally recognizing and making available in their line of clothing.

The internet is fast becoming a place for individuals to shop or find those hard to find items. So, if you are looking for clothes or womens casual, look at the online stores that offer womens casual clothes with the best selection.

Bowe Packer is the webmaster and content provider for <http://www.clothes-4u.com>. His website: <http://www.clothes-4u.com> is dedicated to providing free fashion advice and tips for women. Offering excellent tips and strategies for women to look good in the areas of Casual, Petite Size, Plus Size clothing, as well as dress, athletic and casual shoes. You can reach him at: bowe@clothes-4u.com.

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