

Debating Gender in State Socialist Women's Magazines: the Cases of Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia

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Abstract: Contrary to the accepted Cold War stereotypes about state socialist mass women's organizations, we will show that Communist leaders were attentive to the construction of gender roles and used women's magazines as a forum to discuss openly the changing ideals of masculinity and femininity. Through a discourse analysis of articles in *Vlasta* (Czechoslovakia) and *Zhenata Dnes* (Bulgaria), our article will interrogate the categories of "man" and "woman" and their negotiation during the Communist era on the pages of official state magazines. In the Bulgarian case, we will discuss key articles that explicitly dealt with the importance of fathers and fatherhood, as for the case of Czechoslovakia, we will examine a series of articles and letters in which women's union leaders and ordinary citizens discuss women's entry into the workforce that had previously been the purview of men.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Gender, Masculinity, Femininity, Women's Magazines

Introduction

Feminist theory takes gender to be a category that is created (or constructed) by the social world—religion, education, family structure, consumer culture, etc.—rather than something that is biologically based. In the famous words of Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Yet

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one of the most often repeated tropes of 20th century socialist states in Eastern Europe is that they tended to essentialize sex roles, discursively constructing women as both mothers and workers while ignoring men's roles as fathers. This reification of women's "natural" predisposition for care work exacerbated the notorious "double burden" that women suffered as they struggled to combine formal labor obligations with their domestic responsibilities, exemplified by Natalya Baranskaya's famous 1969 novella, *A Week Like Any Other*. At the same time, masculine identities underwent a dramatic shift as women entered the workforce en masse and men lost their role as the sole breadwinner for their families. As anthropologist Katherine Verdery has argued, 20th century socialist states in Eastern Europe reduced women's economic dependency on men by making both men and women equally dependent on the state. As a result, local meanings regarding appropriate masculinity and femininity became unmoored from pre-communist traditions. In our discourse analysis of articles in *Vlasta* (Czechoslovakia) and *Zhenata Dnes* (Bulgaria), we find evidence that some women no longer considered motherhood to be their "natural" role and were questioning received notions of what it means to be feminine. In the end, we hope to demonstrate that the leaders of communist mass women's organizations, and the editors of their affiliated women's magazines, actively acknowledged the constructed and performative nature of gender roles even as they operated within the political constraints of the state socialist system.

The Czechoslovak Women's Union (CSWU) and Vlasta

Facing a precipitous decline in the country's birth rate, the state-based Czechoslovak Women's Union (CSWU) re-established itself in 1967 after fifty years of inactivity. It was a time of political and social reform, an attempt to create "socialism with a human face," which represented an opportunity for women organizers. The CSWU worked to increase the length of maternity leave, diminish the wage gap between men and women, and provide more social services for women and children. Although these campaigns suggest that the Czechoslovak state imagined that women's most important role in society was motherhood, the CSWU policy initiatives do not tell the whole story. A closer examination of articles in *Vlasta*, the most popular women's magazine in Czechoslovakia at the time, published weekly, demonstrates that ordinary men and women together with public officials interrogated the ideals of femininity and masculinity as constituted under state socialism. Although these citizens did not succeed in redrawing the boundaries of gender and gendered work, there is ample evidence to suggest that they tried.

The CSWU and *Vlasta* were both organs controlled by the centralized Czechoslovak state, but in the late 1960s not all content of *Vlasta* was under the control of the CSWU. Indeed, at one point, the editorial board of *Vlasta* openly criticized some of the leaders of the CSWU for their censorship and attempts to control what

Vlasta was publishing (1968, 2). However, for the most part, the two institutions worked together to shape public policies aimed at increasing the birth rate and alleviating women's double burden of formal labor and domestic work. Many memos from the CSWU were published directly in *Vlasta*, and ordinary women were able to communicate with the CSWU by writing letters to the editor of the magazine. In 1968, *Vlasta* was the second most widely circulated newspaper or journal in Czechoslovakia following the communist party daily, *Rudé Právo*, which had over one million subscribers (True 2003, 43). *Vlasta* became so popular that in February 1968 it doubled the number of pages per issue from 16 to 32 (True 2003, 44). *Vlasta* was widely circulated until 1989 and is published today under private ownership.

Although Marxism does not interrogate gender as a socially constructed category, one can analyze the effects of a socialist economy on gender roles in society and their change in response to ideological shifts. Surely, Czechoslovak activists never formally differentiated "gender" from "sex"; these were concepts that travelled to Eastern Europe from the West after 1989. We will argue, nevertheless, that women in both Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia understood the idea of "gender" as a category of analysis even if they didn't have a word to name it. In their public discussions about the effects of the socialist economy on the traditional roles of men and women, communists understood intuitively that men and women were performing their masculinity and femininity and that they did so according to social scripts that determined what constituted a "real man" and a "real woman." If the socialist state could change the scripts, individuals could adjust their own performances of gender roles for the benefit of society.

After World War II, Czechoslovak women entered the labour force *en masse*. The communist state invested in women's education and training, and participation in the labour force would liberate women from their previous economic dependence on men. Czechoslovak masculinity, which had hitherto been derived from men's role as breadwinners, would have to undergo a profound shift once women began working outside of the home. Moreover, some women stepped into what had been imaged as "masculine" professions: physically gruelling jobs in agriculture and industrial manufacturing as well as professional jobs in medicine and law. Citizens of Czechoslovakia wondered if formal employment, especially in male-dominated sectors, would compromise femininity. As gender roles evolved in the 1950s and 1960s, *Vlasta* provided a forum for men and women to express their anxieties about the tectonic shifts in traditional notions of masculinity and femininity.

The rhetoric from state officials sometimes affirmed traditional gender roles and at other times deconstructed them. For example, V. Štátná, chair of the educational and cultural commission of the Hradec Králové District National Committee, provided insight into the Czechoslovak socialist conception of what constituted appropriate womanhood in a speech at an International Women's Day event in 1968. In justifying the importance of helping women balance the notorious double burden, Štátná cites both biological

determinism (i.e. women's "natural" role as mothers) and women's status as agents who can transcend their biology.

"After all, creating conditions for the harmonious development of a woman's personality is all the more difficult in that, on the one hand, women are psychologically and physically designed to be future mothers, and, on the other hand, they are socially emancipated people who want to assert themselves in society beyond their maternal function" (Štátná 1968, 3).

In order to increase the birth rate, the CSWU had to walk a fine line between valorising women as mothers, but also celebrating women as citizens and workers valued for their other potential societal contributions.

This tension between the importance of maternity and the desire for women's emancipation from the unequal demands of the family life informed a series of articles in *Vlasta* which ran throughout the summer of 1968: "A Discussion on the Emancipation of Women." An op-ed written by a woman named Jarmila Mikolášová from the small town of Písek sparked the initial discussion. Mikolášová wrote, "[t]he emancipation of women in today's sense of the word is an utter degradation of womanhood" (1968, 15). The thrust of Mikolášová's argument is that socialist womanhood, in which women were employed outside the home, sometimes in traditionally masculine professions like surface mining, railroad work, and tractor driving, stripped women of their femininity. She questioned the basic construction of gender under socialism. Of the women who worked in masculine professions, she asked, "is there anything feminine left in these women?" (Mikolášová 1968, 15). In their introduction to the article, the editors of *Vlasta* were careful not to endorse Mikolášová's claim, but rather advised their readers to "consider her words as a stimulus for discussion, for a change of opinion, and for deeper reflection on this issue, which is so complex yet so rarely addressed."

"Emancipation" is a specific idea, and it means something more than equality or empowerment. According to an encyclopedia published by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in 1962 cited in *Vlasta*, "emancipation" refers to "liberation, extrication, equalization, [or] seizing independence" (1968, 6). Originally, "emancipation" referred to the action in Roman law by which a father releases his child from his power so that the child can become legally independent. This stark definition of emancipation is crucial when considering the emancipation of women under socialism. Socialism emancipated women from the necessity of the patriarchal family. Women became adults with legal standing, gained the ability to file for divorce, and were expected to work outside the home. In the original sense of the word, women as a group (of course there were individual variations and exceptions) were emancipated from their husbands and fathers. The question implied in Mikolášová's statement ("The emancipation of women in today's sense of the

word is an utter degradation of womanhood”) is not *if* socialism emancipated women, but what socialist emancipation meant for femininity.

For the most part, Mikolášová's countrywomen did not share her anxiety about the degradation of femininity. Their responses ranged from requests for the state to value women's work outside the home *more*, to questions about men who do their own housework, and a celebration of the independence socialism granted women. The discussion on the emancipation of women also dealt with serious theoretical questions of gender – if it is “natural” or if it is made by the social world, how state socialism was remaking gender, and who was resisting those changes.

Readers could write in and respond to Mikolášová's provocation, and many did. “A Discussion on the Emancipation of Women” continued in two subsequent issues. Sylvie Oehmová, a reader from Prague, wrote a contribution that appeared a week after Mikolášová's original article. Oehmová discussed the impossible set of choices she faced between working and becoming a mother (1968, 11). She was thirty years old and married, but she had no children. She and her husband decided not to have children, she said, because they did not have access to sufficient childcare: they had no relatives living nearby and all “the nurseries are full.” If she were to have a child she would have to take the maximum possible maternity leave—three years—and she did not want to do that. Not only would it be a financial burden on her family to go without her full wages while at home with a child, but she also liked her job. She had worked in the same office for eleven years and it was a short commute from her home. When presented with what she perceived to be a zero-sum choice between work and children, Oehmová chose her role as a breadwinner and an employed citizen over her role as a mother.

The CSWU attended to the concerns of women like Sylvie Oehmová. It supported women as both mothers and citizens. Less than two weeks after Oehmová's op-ed was published, the length of maternity leave increased from 22 to 26 weeks and the rate of compensation women received increased to 90 percent of what they earned at work (Hájková and Groszová 1968, 2). Although this reform would not have solved all of Oehmová's problems, it would have helped to assuage the financial difficulty of temporarily leaving the workforce for maternity leave. The CSWU had initiatives to build more nurseries as well, but those required new infrastructure in a way that maternity leave improvement did not and were thus more complex to implement.

Another woman, R. Trávníčková of Plzeň, worried that the whole discussion on the emancipation of women ignored the concerns of unmarried women without children. Her intuition was right. State-socialist ideology did encourage motherhood—especially as the birth-rate plummeted and labour became increasingly short in supply. However, Trávníčková wholly rejected the assumption that motherhood is women's “natural” purpose. To only valorise women as wives and mothers, she wrote, is to “deny single women their womanhood” (Trávníčková 1968, 11). Mil. Dejčmarová of České Budějovice wrote an op-ed

that appeared next to Trávníčková's. Dejčmarová was also concerned about unmarried women, but her perspective was that of a recent divorcee. She struggled to find an apartment for herself and her two children away from her ex-husband, and suggested that the CSWU provided temporary shelter for women like her until they were able to find a new apartment. In her view, "the CSWU should be an organization set up to help women create conditions so that they could be not just rank-and-file workers like men, but also women and mothers in the true sense of the word" (Dejčmarová 1968, 11). One might assume that when she refers to "women and mothers in the true sense of the word" she means stay-at-home mothers and wives. However, she is speaking about women in situations like hers—women who are not married and for whom staying at home to raise children is not an option. Rather, Dejčmarová wanted the CSWU to help women fulfil the role of provider for their families. Her goal was to provide food, shelter, and security for her children and she would have liked the CSWU to help. When she refers to "mothers in the true sense of the word," Dejčmarová is in fact referring to the traditional role of a father as the family breadwinner. Although she does not say it explicitly, her understanding of parental gender roles is opposite to those dictated by patriarchy.

One man joined in on the debate about the emancipation of women: Ing. (Engineer) Rudolf Straka of Prague. In his opinion, the emancipation of women was at the root of all modern problems. It was bad for everyone—men, children, society, and women themselves. His main technical concern was that women's entry into the work force flooded the labour market and reduced men's wages. In his words, "so it happened that what a man had once earned by himself was now divided in two: one half was paid to an employed woman, and the other, to an employed man" (Straka 1968, 7). Although Straka's math may have been faulty (Czech and Slovak women only earned 60% of what men earned), it reveals his assumption that real women must not work outside the home. He urged women to "return to men the weapon you took away from them," and to

"dedicate yourselves to what is most noble in society. Men have learned from the disarray in their families caused by equal rights. Women, give us offspring, raise them as your heart and your natural behaviour tells you to (Straka 1968, 7)."

Straka did not speak for all men, but the editors of *Vlasta* must have believed his views to be somewhat representative of his fellow compatriots because they included his piece for publication. He clearly felt that women's emancipation threatened his ability to earn money and provide for his family. Because socialism had emancipated women from the home and made men and women equally responsible for paid employment, Straka felt that Czechoslovak socialism was a threat to masculinity. Furthermore, women's desire to have careers in the modern economy was "unnatural," and, by extension, socialism promoted unhealthy and unnatural gender roles.

Straka's solution to the problem of women's emancipation, as he saw it, was for women to return to their rightful places in the home, where, in his opinion, they had the most power. To Straka, a woman's charm and sexual appeal were far more effective than political organizing. "If you stand faithfully at your husbands' sides, wherever they stand on the social scale, you can influence them so completely that they will do everything you wish for you and your whole gender" (Straka 1968, 7). Few women agreed with Straka, and the CSWU continued organizing until shortly after the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968. His traditionalist backlash is revealing, though, because it indicates that Czechoslovak women had achieved meaningful emancipation.

Thankfully, for every man who longed to return to the days when women were confined to the home, there was one who looked toward the future. Two young women, M. Svozilová, a law student, and M. Hokešová, a medical student, contributed their observations about these men to the discussion on women's emancipation. They had seen "several men who are exceptions, not like other men... Perhaps [they] are the men of the future for women of the future?" (Hokešová and Svozilová 1968, 6). Hokešová and Svozilová understood emancipation had changed femininity and that gender roles were malleable. They were educated and on their way toward being professionals, and they wanted men who would treat them as such. These "men of the future" were self-sufficient. The authors were amazed that these men did their own housework and did not rely on mothers or girlfriends. "Just imagine, these men *also* do their own laundry...and even cook for themselves." Their wry tone suggests that they were aware of how low a bar a man doing his own laundry is, but they were still excited about the possibility of it. According to these new men, a date should be something intellectually stimulating, "they propose studying languages together—and are in favour of doctors marrying doctors; engineers, engineers; lawyers, lawyers." They respected their partners' intellect and, "say that young married couples like them should live in 'double studios,' so that each can have his own time for mental labour." Interestingly, these men wanted to have children, but "they worry that caring for children would divert their wife away from her personal growth." These men certainly did not consider motherhood to be women's "natural" role. Rather, they celebrated and prioritized women's careers outside the home.

Clearly these young women were excited about the development of new men who respected them as intellectual and professional equals and did not relegate them to the kitchen. They identified a moment of gender transformation. Not only did these new men not feel threatened by the entry of women to the workforce, they were excited about it. They wanted their romantic partners to have careers comparable to theirs—doctors marry doctors, etc. However, Svozilová and Hokešová remained cautious. They were afraid that these men might be too good to be true. They worried that all their performed equality might just be to garner favour with women and that when they were married they would abandon those

lofty ideals and leave the laundry to their wives. So, in true scientific socialist fashion, Svozilová and Hokešová sought a technical answer. They wrote to *Vlasta* to ask if these men were real. “Can some expert give us an answer? From psychology? Sociology? Pedagogy?” Unfortunately, Svozilová and Hokešová received no response from the editors. Their inquiry ran in *Vlasta* just over a month before the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Under “normalization,” the discussion on the emancipation of women swiftly came to a halt.

But, as Ing. Straka demonstrated, gender transformations are not without concomitant backlashes, and twenty years into the Czechoslovak experiment with socialism, some men and women believed there had been too much emancipation. In the final instalment of “A discussion on the emancipation of women,” published on August 14, 1968, exactly one week before the Warsaw Pact invasion, Eva Štolbová, a *Vlasta* contributor, discussed the changing gender roles and the backlash they created, providing a complex portrait of femininity under socialism. She wrote: “‘Womanhood,’ ‘femininity’ [is something] at which we are seldom taken aback, because its content, as far as our knowledge of it is concerned, seems certain and unproblematic” (Štolbová 1968, 7). This reified idea of traditional Czechoslovak womanhood is the femininity that authors like Mikolášová feared had been lost. Štolbová noted that, “we are now in some sense trying to ‘rehabilitate’ the concept of femininity, things specific to women, and so on.” But ultimately, according to Štolbová, women were better off without being bound to the old concept of femininity. The changing status of women—participation in civic life, access to abortion, entry into the work force, increased access to education—resulted in, “new, often positive aspects of the feminine nature and led to changes not just in the quantity of women getting involved in society-wide activity, but also in the quality of their approach to facts, opinions, interests, assessments, and mental life.” In short, the new socialist femininity, or new womanhood, was good for women beyond just granting them economic independence. Emancipation improved the quality of women’s emotional and intellectual lives as well as their material circumstances.

Another reader, Helena Štouračová, embodied a different variety of new femininity. She was an agricultural worker in the tiny town of Zaječice, and was a woman doing manual—and perhaps masculinizing—labour. Štouračová was unconcerned with preserving “proper” womanhood. Rather, she acknowledged the dignity of gruelling physical work. Her mother was an agricultural worker too, and she “greatly enjoyed her work” (Štouračová 1968, 11). Štouračová writes that, “it really hurts me a lot when someone turns up their nose at older women who have done nothing but slave away their entire lives. And it’s usually people who could not even imagine such hard work” (1968, 11). She doesn’t consider a woman who has done strenuous physical labour her whole life to be less of a woman, but she does suggest ways her burden might be lifted. She called for the socialization of domestic labour in the rural areas as it was in the cities, “stores with fabrics and food, laundry collection

points (if not laundries themselves), [and] cooking facilities” (Štouračová 1968, 11). Štouračová embodied the degraded womanhood that Mikolášová originally decried, but she did not want to exit the labour force to regain some ideal of femininity prized by urban women. Libora Oates-Indruchová has argued that authoritative Czechoslovak socialist discourses on gender “promoted women’s emancipation,” but “had to compete with residual patriarchal discourse” (2012, 378). The articles published in *Vlasta* as part of the “discussion on the emancipation of women” support her argument, and demonstrate that ordinary citizens—not just state authority figures—navigated the tension between emancipatory socialist ideals and the lingering influence of patriarchy.

Ultimately, the discourse on gender was stunted. All of the women who eagerly wrote to *Vlasta* to debate the meaning of emancipation continued to live their gendered lives, but they were no longer able to discuss what that meant in a public forum. Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia on August 20, 1968 and put a halt to all political discussions in the country, indiscriminate of whether they were technically part of the reform movement or not. Upon invasion, the CSWU stood with the rest of the country, adopting, “an entirely unambiguous stance in support of our president, Comrade Svoboda, in support of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Central Committee led by Comrade Dubček, the National Assembly led by Comrade Smrkovský, our government led by Comrade Černík, and the National Front led by Comrade Kriegl” (*Vlasta* editors 1968, 3). In the immediate wake of the invasion, they stood firm. However, as time went on the content of the magazine became increasingly apolitical and, in 1969, the Czechoslovak Women’s Union was disbanded, and its leaders forced to resign. After 1968, the so-called period of normalization saw a return to traditional gender roles, with women increasingly focused on their families and the domestic sphere (Lišková 2016). After 1968, the so-called natural ideas of masculinity and femininity returned until the end of communism in 1989, when consumer capitalism introduced a new set of patriarchal gender roles (True 2003).

The Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement (CBWM) and Zhenata Dnes

Like Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria had an official state-sponsored women’s committee, which had various names before it became the Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement (CBWM) in 1968. The magazine *Zhenata Dnes* (The Woman Today) was the official state women’s magazine during the communist era, and it was published under the auspices of the state women’s committee. It was first published in 1945 with twenty-four pages and a circulation of 20,000 (Pavlova 2011). Thirty years later, the magazine had doubled its page count, and increased its circulation dramatically: there were 400,000 copies in Bulgarian and 120,000 in Russian.¹

In a letter from the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM) to the publications secretary of the Central Committee, the women's committee asserted that there were an additional 100,000 Bulgarian women who desired subscriptions to the magazine, but they were unable to meet this demand because they had used up their paper quota.² Eventually, *Zhenata Dnes* received the permission and paper to print 500,000 Bulgarian and 100,000 Russian copies for a total population of about 4.5 million women, meaning that almost one in every seven Bulgarian women received the magazine (Badzheva 2005).

Zhenata Dnes became a valuable platform encouraging dialogue between the CBWM and ordinary working women in Bulgaria on domestic issues relevant to their lives (Badzheva 2005). While there is no doubt that *Zhenata Dnes* officially supported socialist ideology and heralded the achievements of the Bulgarian Communist Party and other "brother" communist parties across the globe, it also catered to the more quotidian interests of its subscribers. Mixed in among the articles celebrating the superiority of state socialism, the magazine published recipes, sewing patterns, poetry, short fiction, travel articles, horoscopes, fashion pages, and even a personals section where lonely Bulgarian men could place small ads. The Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova has argued that the popularity of *Zhenata Dnes* resulted from its decision to not politicize the issues about which ordinary women wanted to read (Todorova 1994). The magazine constructed an "imagined community" of Bulgarian women across ethnicities, generations, professions, and educational levels (Nikolova and Ghodsee 2014).

While it is certainly true that the magazine ran many articles focusing on women as both mothers and workers, actively constructing an ideal type of socialist femininity, the journalists and editors of *Zhenata Dnes*, like those of *Vlasta*, also tried to reshape masculine identities, understanding that gender roles were not natural and fixed, but rather something which could be changed through socialist education for the greater good of society. Since 1944, Bulgarian women had been incorporated into the labour force much like their Czechoslovak sisters. The Bulgarians faced a similar demographic decline in the late 1960s and the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement was re-organized under new leadership in 1968. The goal of this reorganization was to increase the domestic birth rate while still maintaining women's full labour force participation. The CBWM was explicitly pro-natalist in its policies, but it did not believe that children were the responsibility solely of women. The CBWM and the editors of *Zhenata Dnes* actively tried to convince Bulgarian men and women that fathers should play a greater role in childrearing and in domestic work to alleviate some of women's many responsibilities. Since men and women both worked outside of the home, they should share work inside the home as well. Because Bulgaria never experienced an invasion, the CBWM actively tried to reshape ideas about Bulgarian masculinity for a

much longer period than in Czechoslovakia. Although they met similar obstacles, it is important to recognize that there was a conscious attempt to challenge traditional ideas about appropriate femininity and masculinity.

In the July 1968 issue of *Zhenata Dnes*, the editors included a two-page photo spread of images taken on the streets of Bulgaria by Barbara Krilova ("Bashti" 1968, 12-13). Five of the six photos featured Bulgarian men holding the hands of their children or pushing prams, showcasing the new Bulgarian ideal of involved fatherhood. A short editorial text accompanied the images, which begins with quotes from several men proudly saying, "That is my son" or "That is my daughter" or "I am the father," taking credit for the accomplishments of their children. The editors then inquired whether these men had the right to claim any responsibility for the achievements of their sons and daughters, given that most of the work associated with childrearing was performed almost exclusively by women:

"It's nice when a person can say with pride, "this is my son," [or] "this is my daughter," but how much parental effort stands behind this claim? How many days and nights of parental care, of battles and victories, of privation, of reflection... And how many thousands of ordinary cares? To dress and undress the helpless little person, to change wet nappies, to tie and untie shoes, to calm them down, to wash them, to feed them, to take them out.... People used to believe that these cares were the responsibility of only the mother. But today, fathers are helping too. We can see them on the streets, leading their daughters to kindergarten. We see them at the morning children's puppet shows, and most often in the parks pushing baby carriages." ("Bashti" 1968, 12).

Women reading this story, especially those outside of the urban areas, might have been incredulous had this text not been accompanied by photos. In 1968, most Bulgarian men (and many Bulgarian women) still deemed childcare and domestic work "unmanly," and the overwhelming burden of this labour fell on the shoulders of women who also held down full time jobs outside of the home. The leaders of the CBWM and the editors of *Zhenata Dnes* suspected the precipitous decline in the birth rate might be the result of the double burden that women faced (Ghodsee 2014). The socialist state had worked for over two decades to fully incorporate women into the labour force, and now it turned its attention to convincing men to participate equally in the labour of maintaining a family. The major obstacle to this development was the traditional Bulgarian patriarchal expectations that domestic labour was women's work, and the editors tried to argue that given the new socialist reality of sex equality, it was "natural" that fathers should be involved in the raising of children:

"It is good that we are seeing them [fathers] more often in grocery stores with heavy bags. Fathers, who share with us [mothers] the efforts of housekeeping and the care of children: their troubles and the work necessary for their

upbringing. *And it is so natural.* The kids belong to both parents, right? Their first words are “mom” and “dad,” right? ...Why then should care for children not be divided equally? Mom is a worker, and a student, and an engineer, right?” (“Bashti” 1968, 13).

The short text concludes with the recognition that many men still believe that childcare should be done by women, but the editors of *Zhenata Dnes* evince hope that younger men will come to appreciate being more involved in the lives of their children and that they will be active parents “without being embarrassed about it.” The article concludes: “Good fathers! Smart fathers! Real fathers! They gain a lot: the child’s love, the thankfulness and affection of the mother, and the respect of our society” (“Bashti” 1968, 13).

This early attempt at reshaping gender roles in Bulgaria was followed by a massive sociological survey distributed to all subscribers of *Zhenata Dnes* in 1969. Its purpose: to ascertain why families were choosing to have fewer children. Were women rejecting motherhood because they felt constrained by traditional gender roles? Was women’s equality with men only possible in the absence of children? The survey, “Women in Production, Social Life and the Family,” consisted of multiple-choice questions asking readers about the details of their daily lives. In the end, the editors of the magazine received 16,060 anonymous replies, allowing them to investigate how material realities and perceptions of appropriate masculinity and femininity affected the birth rate.³

The survey produced three key findings. The first was that most Bulgarian women said they desired more children. In 1969, Bulgarian women had an average of 1.84 children, but they admitted in the survey to wanting an average of 2.28 children. The second finding was that Bulgarian women were desperate to find adequate childcare: only 22.8% of the children under the age of seven were cared for in state funded kindergartens or crèches, and 8% of these young children were left alone while their parents worked.⁴ Although women solicited help from grandparents and husbands, the primary responsibility for looking after young children still fell on mothers, a major disincentive to having another baby. The third finding was that Bulgarian women did indeed suffer under a heavy double burden of formal employment and domestic work. Women spent an average of eight hours a day their jobs, and needed an additional one to two hours for their commutes. On top of this nine or ten hour work day, they spent another four and a half hours cooking, cleaning the house, standing in line for household necessities, washing and ironing and working on private agricultural plots. Exhausted women made individual decisions that resulted in a national crisis (Bordrova and Anker 1985). Bulgarian women had been emancipated in theory, but in practice they were suffering under the massive pressure of a society that valorised motherhood, but refused to support it with concrete resources.

A second survey included in the March 1970 edition of *Zhenata Dnes* asked the question: “What Kind of Woman am I?” The survey was designed by Maria

Dinkova, Raina Pesheva, and Liliyana Spaskova (1970, 19-20), and asked intimate questions about how powerful accepted gender roles for women shaped their behaviour in everyday life. The survey asked questions such as: "If you are very tired, but there is a lot of laundry to be done, what do you do?" And respondents were given choices such as: "If I'm tired or not, I will do the laundry because there is no one else to do it," or "I will give the work to another member of my family." Another question asked women "How does your husband appreciate you as a housewife?" with a range of possible answers including, "he is always happy with me" and "he is never happy with me, but I am a bad housewife." In the June, August, and September issues of the magazine, Maria Dinkova reported some of the findings in her multi-part series of articles, "Women today and tomorrow" (Dinkova 1970a, 2-3, 16; Dinkova 1970b, 8-9; Dinkova 1970c, 6-7). She found that women were not only suffering a double burden, but they were active participants in their own oppression because they clung to outmoded gender roles and refused to challenge their husbands to help out around the home.

After these surveys, the CBWM considered different policies that might increase the birth rate (Dinkova 2003). For political reasons, the CBWM never seriously considered a solution that included a reduction in women's employment outside of the home: socialist ideology demanded the full participation of women in the workforce in order to reduce their economic dependence on men and to ensure sexual equality, and the Bulgarian government needed women's labour to support its program of rapid industrialization. Moreover, mass literacy campaigns and investments in women's education and training meant that Bulgarian women possessed valuable human capital. Not to make use of their skills would be a waste of talent, particularly since women now dominated the white-collar professions of law, medicine, education, and banking (Ghodsee 2005). Finally, the *Zhenata Dnes* survey found that women *wanted* to be *both* mothers and workers, and had no interest in staying at home.

Instead, the CBWM advocated for a massive expansion of state entitlements for mothers. They proposed to socialize domestic labour as much as possible, and called on the state to increase the construction of crèches and kindergartens. They also advocated for a new maternity leave policy that would allow women two years of paid leave from the labour force with a guarantee that their jobs would be held for them in their absence. Furthermore, time spent on maternity leave was to count as labour service toward women's pensions. The CBWM proposal also included a provision for child allowances, which the state would pay to new mothers on the birth of a baby. The CBWM advocated for the expansion of workplace cafeterias where meals could be prepared for women to take home after their factory shifts. Ideally, these policies would reduce the double burden on individual women. When this was proposed in 1970, no other socialist country had such a generous set of maternity provisions in place to support working mothers (Leykin 2012). Indeed, the USSR would not get a comprehensive maternity leave policy until 1981 (Zakharov 2008).

As in Czechoslovakia, these pro-natalist measures reinforced the idea that maternity was a social responsibility of women and valorised women's roles as workers and mothers, but the CBWM, working together with the journalists of *Zhenata Dnes* (many of whom were also full members of the CBWM), did not give up in their efforts to convince men to be more active fathers. Their advocacy led to a key Politburo decision that established many of the new social entitlements for mothers in March of 1973 (Ghodsee 2014). The decision included explicit language aimed at convincing Bulgarian men to be more active in the home:

“The reduction and alleviation of woman's household work depends greatly on the common participation of the two spouses in the organization of family life. It is therefore imperative

a) to combat outdated views, habits, and attitudes as regards the allocation of work within the family;

b) to prepare young men for the performance of household duties from childhood and adolescence both by the school and society and by the family...” (Decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party 1974, 10).

The editors of *Zhenata Dnes* supported the new Politburo law with a series of articles in September, October and November of 1973. These articles, “Men Have a Word,” recorded the conversations of a group of men about issues relating to marriage and childrearing in contemporary Bulgaria, allowing them to have a public discussion about changing gender roles. The magazine invited several men, “writers, journalists, manual labourers, lawyers, teachers, sociologists and engineers of different ages and family situations” to give their opinions on women's attitudes and behaviours “that sometimes ruin family harmony or worsen the climate in the workplace.” (“Imat Dumata Mazhete” 1973a, 1973b, 1973c). These articles allowed men to freely ruminate on women's roles in modern society, and, by extension, the roles that modern men should play within the domestic sphere. The tone of the conversations suggests that gender roles were not “natural,” and that at least some Bulgarian men understood that masculinity and femininity are malleable rather than fixed categories.

In December of 1974, the editors of *Zhenata Dnes* ran a two-page spread titled, “Nine Fathers Answer our Question: How Do You Imagine the Future of Your Child?” (Markova 1974). The article featured photographs of nine Bulgarian fathers with their babies, often in poses associated with motherhood: cradling an infant, kissing its forehead, or bathing a naked baby in a small plastic tub. Once again, the editors of *Zhenata Dnes* used ordinary Bulgarian men to help valorise active fatherhood and to explore the future these fathers wanted for their children. Although some of these engaged fathers held on to traditional ideas about what careers were appropriate for boys and girls—one father, an accountant from Haskovo, wished that his son might become a military officer, a “manly profession, which does not tolerate weak

men”—others were more open minded. Another father, a construction worker from the city of Stara Zagora explained that “[t]oday, there are no purely male or purely female professions. My daughter can become a construction worker like me.” But even the accountant was willing to concede that his son might choose a different path in life. He recognized that both boys and girls should be able to pursue their own paths.

In 1975, *Zhenata Dnes* also conducted a variety of reader surveys that explicitly asked about changing gender roles in Bulgarian society. One survey asked “5188 women of every social and age group” to identify themselves with one of four types of woman: the traditional wife, the transitioning wife, the modern wife, and the professional. The traditional wife placed greatest value on her work in the home, while the professional valued most her contributions to her career. The “modern wife” placed an equal emphasis on her family responsibilities and her professional life, finding self-worth in both spheres. The transitioning wife was an intermediate stage between the traditional and the modern. In her 1975 article, “Discourse on the Problems of Modern Family Life: The Modern Wife,” Maria Dinkova examined changing Bulgarian ideas about the role of women in marriage (Dinkova 1975, 16-17). Based on the survey data, she reported that, in 1975, 39.9 percent of Bulgarian women considered themselves “modern wives, mothers, and homemakers” as opposed to only 12.8 percent who claimed they were “traditional wives, mothers, and homemakers.” An additional 30.3 percent placed themselves in the transitioning phase, and only 1.2 percent identified as “professionals.” Moreover, of the women who identified as “modern wives, mothers, and homemakers,” 42.5 percent were white-collar workers, 29.8 percent were blue-collar workers, and 26.8 percent were agricultural workers. Dinkova argued that educational level and professional experience influence a woman’s perception of the ideal wife, while reinforcing the idea that a woman should strive to be both a mother and a worker. More educated women embraced more readily new socialist gender norms.

In 1979, *Zhenata Dnes* published another survey asking about the state of contemporary masculinity: “The Modern Man: Do We Know Him Well? Does He Know Enough About Himself?” (“Nashata Anketa” 1979, 29-30) This fascinating survey asked a wide variety of questions such as: “How often does your husband bathe, swaddle or feed the baby and with what attitude?” “What do you like and dislike about relationships between the modern man and the modern woman?” And “what should a man do if he learns that his girlfriend or wife cheated on him?” One question directly asked readers to reflect on the performance of gender roles: “Which character traits and behaviours make a man seem masculine? Which of these traits does the modern man have, and which doesn’t he have?”

In November and December of 1979 and January of 1980, the journalist Pavlina Popova published three articles about manhood and fatherhood in Bulgaria, the result of ten interviews she conducted in 1978 and 1979 in

combination with some of the results from “The Modern Man” survey: “Fathers: First Attempt at a Portrait,” (Popova 1979a, 6-7), “Fathers: Second Attempt at a Portrait,” (Popova 1979b, 6-7) and “Fathers: Third Attempt at a Portrait,” (Popova 1980, 12-13, 21). These articles discuss changing conventions for modern Bulgarians, particularly the new social expectations that men should be more active in the home. As in the Czechoslovak case, some Bulgarians (both men and women) feared that modern Bulgarian society was destroying natural masculinity and femininity. What is most striking about the first article is that Popova begins with a discussion of fatherhood as a “biological necessity” versus a “social need.” She explores evolving conceptions of masculinity through an in-depth look at ten men for whom fatherhood is a social need—a fundamental part of their identity—and celebrates the “moral strength of those husbands who...transformed the blind instinct of continuing their lineage into conscious parenthood.”

As with all articles published in *Zhenata Dnes*, Popova’s article encourages families to have more children. However, Popova tries to walk a fine line between promoting more egalitarian participation in childrearing while reassuring her audience that men could still be masculine and women could still be feminine. The stereotype of the socialist woman was that she had little time for personal grooming and that the overwhelming responsibilities of her work and family prematurely aged her face and body. Popova tries to argue that having multiple children and working has no effect on women’s looks: “The younger ones [mothers] maintained their ladylike figure, and the older ones have added a sense of warmth and care to their physical attractiveness” (Popova 1979). She goes on to say that despite the growing equality within modern Bulgarian marriages, men still needed to maintain masculine traits, writing that in the couples that she interviewed, the wife’s “femininity blossomed in the presence of a manly husband. The manly presence of [the woman’s] husband could be sensed at all times, despite the equality of their voices.” Popova does not explicitly discuss what it means to be a “manly presence,” but she assures the reader that none of the men she interviewed had compromised their masculinity by being involved fathers.

But convincing men to help out with childcare proved much easier than trying to convince them to cook, clean, or do laundry. An article publishing in *Zhenata Dnes* in November 1983, “Heads up, fathers!” discussed the durability of traditional gender roles when it came to housework (Antov 1983). The article begins with a quote from a letter sent in by a reader with the initials “D. M.”:

“We live with my husband’s parents. Despite all of the efforts I’ve made during the years of our married life, I could not convince him to help me with the housework. His attitude toward his household duties annoys me. He thinks that all housework is “women’s work”...So when he comes home from work, first he reads the newspaper, then he plays with the child, watches television, and waits to be invited to dinner” (Antov 1983, 15).

The accompanying article, written by a man, features two photos: one of a moustachioed man knitting what looks like a scarf, and the other of a man in an apron boiling laundry. A second article in the December issue, "Men without weaknesses," features a photo of a young bearded man at a typewriter feeding a baby with a bottle (Smirinski 1983). Both articles discuss the idea that modern men should be secure enough in their masculinity to help their wives in the home, even with tasks that are considered "women's work." The authors argue that it is outdated to think that men shouldn't cook or clean; the new ideal of manhood is inextricably linked with being an involved father and a supportive husband. The editors of *Zhenata Dnes* even went so far as to put a young man walking with a small baby strapped to his chest on the cover of their November 1987 issue.

Thus, from 1968 through the 1980s, there is evidence of numerous explicit discussions of shifting gender roles in the pages of *Zhenata Dnes* as the editors tried to promote the idea that masculinity and femininity were not fixed and naturally defined, but rather malleable concepts that could, and, indeed, should change with the socialist development of Bulgarian society. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to show that Bulgarian men fully embraced these new "modern roles." Unlike the Czechoslovaks who abruptly reverted to traditional gender roles after the Soviet invasion, the Bulgarian socialists had almost two full decades to try to challenge traditional patriarchy. Despite the extra years, Bulgarian women still laboured under the double burden of formal employment and domestic responsibilities until communism in Bulgaria collapsed in 1989. But this was not for lack of effort on the part of the CBWM. Not surprisingly, twenty years of state socialism proved insufficient to undo centuries of Bulgarian patriarchy.

Conclusion

It is generally accepted that 20th century European socialist countries formally emancipated women, but did not challenge patriarchy or sexism (Scott 1974; Jancar 1978; Funk and Mueller 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000; Havelková and Oates-Indruchová 2014). Although men and women had equal rights, "man" and "woman" were to remain distinct, unchanging, and natural categories. We have challenged this assumption and argued that the state affiliated women's unions and magazines in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria did in fact attempt to redefine gender roles. Although neither country succeeded in abolishing all notions of gendered categories and gendered work, they did attempt to break down the definitions dictating that women's natural place was in the home and men's was at work. These challenges to traditional masculinity and femininity emerged in both countries in the late 1960s, but lasted much longer in Bulgaria. In Czechoslovakia, public discussion of changing gender roles was cut short by the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968 and the subsequent policy of "normalization."

Mead's analysis of Czechoslovakia has focused on a series of articles in *Vlasta*, the official state women's magazine, entitled "A discussion on the emancipation of women." The contributors included women's union officials, editors and staff writers for the magazine, social sciences experts, and, mostly, ordinary women. These articles reflect that regular citizens, not just political officials, recognized that gender was shaped by the social world and were engaged in the project of reshaping gender roles. They discussed the changing of gender roles during twenty years of socialism, focusing on how femininity changed as women entered the workforce. "Woman" was no longer synonymous with "mother" and "wife," and, for the most part, women no longer understood motherhood and marriage to be their natural roles.

Ghodsee's analysis of Bulgaria has focused on masculinity and fatherhood—the other half of the socialist leaders' attempt to reshape gender roles. After discovering that the declining birth rate was due to women's exhaustion from the notorious "double burden," the Bulgarian women's union and women's magazine, *Zhenata Dnes*, tried to involve men in so-called "women's work," including childcare, cooking, and cleaning. *Zhenata Dnes* featured interviews with engaged fathers and helpful husbands and photos of men doing traditionally feminine activities, such as knitting and feeding babies. Although the men of Bulgaria never fully adopted these roles—and the state stopped encouraging them to after the fall of communism in 1989—they were actively urged to expand their definitions of "normal" masculinity.

Our research would be enriched by similar gendered analyses of state sponsored women's magazines in other socialist countries to provide a broader comparison. Indeed, there are many aspects of state socialist women's organizations and gendered life under socialism that have yet to be studied, although there is growing interest in this field of inquiry. We call for further research into these topics in order to create a more comprehensive and nuanced narrative of the history of women and socialism in Eastern Europe.

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Endnotes

1. Ghodsee used the CBWM archive (collection 417) in the Central State Archives in Sofia, Bulgaria. For archival sources from the Central State Archive, she uses the standard form of Bulgarian citation, e.g. Tsentralen Darzhaven Arhiv (TsDA), F-417, O-5, E-96, L-9-22 where F = fond (the archival collection), O = opis (a sub-unit within the main collection), E = edinitsa (an individual folder) and L = list (the page numbers). TsDA-F417-O4-ae492: 71-72.
2. TsDA-F417-O4-ae492: 71-72.
3. "Anketna karta: Zhenata v Proizvodstvoto, Ocshtestveniya Zhivot i Semeistvoto," This document comes from the personal archives of Elena Lagadinova (PAoEL), the former president of the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM).
4. All figures taken from the placards prepared by Elena Lagadinova for a meeting with Todor Zhivkov to discuss women's issues in 1971, PAoEL.