

The Role of the International Organizations on Women's Civil Organization in Post-Communist Bulgaria¹

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Introduction

Since the collapse of socialism, the challenges of establishing liberal democratic institutions as well as the creation of unfettered "free" markets has meant radical social, political, and ideological changes for the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. As the international financial community demands tighter fiscal policies to maintain economic stability, however, not all sections of the population are equally effected. The shrinking of the socialist state and the ramifications of wide spread privatization have disproportionately placed a heavier burden on women.

Yet despite the fact that these nations once boasted the highest rates of female labor participation in the world, Eastern European women have not mobilized to challenge the forces pushing them out of the workplace and into the home. Bulgarian women are no exception. Since the "revolution" of 1989, unemployment has increased drastically while political participation rates for women have fallen. Hyperinflation has eaten away at pensions and unemployment compensations. At the same time, prices for basic goods have risen. Social services which once supported the Bulgarian woman's dual role as worker and mother have begun to disappear making women even less competitive in the newly established labor markets while, more than ever, two wages are needed to support the family. The few education and retraining programs that have appeared are targeted primarily at men. In the face of these

changes, Bulgarian women, like those in other nations of the former Eastern Bloc, have not organized a challenge to the retrenchment of traditional ideals of femininity and the glorification of the domestic sphere as their "proper" place.

Many explanations have been given for this phenomenon, ranging from the Eastern European woman's so-called "allergy" to feminism to their experience of "over-emancipation" under communism. This paper will examine the realities of women in Bulgaria during the restructuring of the past ten years. The evidence will suggest that, in addition to the structural imperatives of the rapid changes, the policies of international organizations are also playing a major role in marginalizing women's issues in the building of the post-socialist state.

This paper will look at projects and objectives supported by the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank and the European Union's PHARE Programme, which have been or are currently in operation in Bulgaria. There is extensive theoretical evidence and empirical research by feminist scholars which clearly shows that international policies aimed at "helping" nations to "develop" have differential gender consequences. Despite this, a careful analysis of the documented goals and agendas of the aforementioned organizations will demonstrate that none of them have successfully integrated gender concerns into their programs in the former Eastern Bloc although these programs are structurally similar to those applied in developing countries. This external lack of concern, along with the historical and cultural circumstances informing the realities of women in post-communist Bulgaria, provides an often overlooked explanation for the lack of women's civil organization.

Bulgarian Women and Transition

Since 1997 (when the true beginning of stabilization and privatization in the Bulgarian economy began) Bulgarians have suffered greatly from the political and economic transformations. This is particularly true for Bulgarian women. The process of privatization and the closing of inefficient industries has meant the displacement of many Bulgarian workers. As new firms struggle to become and remain competitive in a capitalist system, they are forced to shed unproductive workers. Under these new circumstances, women are often the first to be let go.

Like other communist nations, the Bulgarian economy revolved around its heavy industry where the majority of men were employed at higher wages. During the transition from communism these industries have been the first to be closed because of inefficiency and/or problems of environmental pollution. Instead, workers are being directed to jobs in the light industries and services, which during communism were largely the domain of women. Now that men are entering the market for these jobs, women are considered less competitive. The possibility of maternity and child-care leave in addition to frequent absences to tend sick family members mean that women are now viewed as unreliable and expensive compared to their male counterparts. The very laws that once helped women to combine their productive and reproductive roles are now pushing them out of the public sphere.²

Consequently, Bulgarian women continue to make up the majority of the registered unemployed. In 1999, 53.7 per cent of those registered at employment offices were women, an 11.6 per cent increase on 1998 (Republic of Bulgaria 2000: 4-10). In some parts of the country, women made up as much as 62 per cent of the registered unemployed in 1998 (UNDP 1999). Moreover, the legal provision of equal pay for equal work was removed in 1992 and the wage gap between women and men widened from 73 per cent in 1994 to 68 per cent in 1997 (Women's Alliance for Development 2000).

Furthermore, the post-1989 restructuring also hit the sectors in which women were the most vulnerable to redundancies, primarily the bloated public sector. Employment in the this sector has experienced a steady downward plunge; from 1997 to 1999 alone it decreased by 12.9 per cent (Republic of Bulgaria 2000). As women lose their jobs in the public sector, they have little choice but to accept work in the burgeoning footwear and apparel manufacturing sector where wages and working conditions are among the worst in the country (Ghodsee forthcoming).

In the realm of politics, Bulgarian women have also lost ground. In 1988, before the fall of the Zhivkov regime, women held 21% of the seats in the Parliament. After the advent of free elections, this number dropped dramatically to only 8.5 percent. By 1999, this number had risen again to 11.5 percent (Holmes 1997, WAD 2000), still a substantial decline from the communist years. Einhorn (1993) has argued in the case of Eastern and Central Europe that this decrease in numbers should not be cause for alarm. Women in politics today are not merely the tokens they once were, but rather, even in their decreased numbers, they are more powerful because they can express and represent challenging political opinions instead of silently towing the Party line. Despite these arguments, however, women are still significantly underrepresented in elected office.

The institution of marriage has also reverted to its economic function, as evidenced by a general decrease in divorces as women become more dependent on their husbands for survival. In the realm of discourse, there is a retrenchment of "traditional" attitudes toward women's "proper place." As the state relinquishes its paternalistic control of society, this role is being re-established in the household. Dimitrina Petrova (1993) has pointed to the irony that the "breadwinner/housewife" family structure is making a comeback through popular images proliferated by the male-dominated media exactly as men's wages become insufficient to support

their families. Like many other countries in Eastern Europe, women's emancipation is being conflated with the evils of communism.

Perhaps even more insidious is the plethora of negative and demeaning images of women produced and promoted by this same popular media. The ideological vacuum which followed the collapse of communism also meant an implosion of the old socialist role models. The rampant criminality that has characterized much of the post-socialist world has promoted a Mafia aesthetic that glorifies the short-skirted, gold-digging *mutressa* as the ultimate expression of successful (if not predatory) femininity. The popular pop-folk music called *chalga* has also helped to elevate the "ambitious bimbo" icon to new heights in the national imagination. Young people see the life of easy money and kept women as a radical, and therefore rebellious departure from the socialist past where men and women were supposedly equal and equally shared an ever-declining standard of living.

Very much related to this cultural trend is the real increase in prostitution and the transnational trafficking of women's bodies. A 1997 study on the demography of prostitution in Bulgaria found that 33 percent of the interviewed women had been forced into prostitution for purely economic reasons. The study also found that a prostitute could earn more money from only one contact with a customer than both her parents could earn in a month. Additionally, 42 percent of the women interviewed wanted to travel abroad. The study concluded that Bulgaria is rapidly becoming a prime country where prostitutes can be easily recruited for international "work" (Tchoudomirova et al. 1997). After the Ukraine, Bulgaria is the second largest exporter of women for sex work in Europe (WAD 2000).

The International Organization for Migration (1999) estimates that over 10,000 Bulgarian women, many of them minors, were working as sex slaves in Western Europe. These young Bulgarian women are so eager to go abroad that they are often the victims of international crime

syndicates that traffic in women's bodies.³ An even more convincing barometer of the difficulties women face in Bulgaria is the proliferation of Bulgarian mail-order brides sites available on the Internet. These Internet marriage agencies, many of which are actually based in Bulgaria, facilitate introductions between Bulgarian women and Western men. Although many sites will not post the pictures of women under 18, "www.apollon.net" offers the addresses of girls from 15 years of age.

One positive note is that female reproductive rights and access to safe abortions have not been threatened in Bulgaria as they have in other post-socialist countries. Overall, however, the effects of the transition from communism have meant greater hardships for women, with even more challenges to come as increased privatization and marketization take hold. Given that these dynamics are more or less the same throughout the post-communist world, many academics and activists in the West have wondered why Eastern European women have not organized to challenge the social, political, and economic forces pushing them out of the public and back into the private sphere. The next section will examine many of the explanations which have been posed and suggests another important factor that must not be ignored: the role of international organizations.

Women and Civil Society in Eastern Europe

There has been considerable discussion of the plight of women during the transitions from communism. In all of the countries of the region, women's political and economic participation in society has dramatically decreased since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Yet these changes and the accompanying deterioration of women's living standards have not resulted in the creation of any significant women's movements. What follows is a very brief overview of

some of the most often cited reasons for what Einhorn (1993) has called the Eastern woman's "allergy to feminism."

Their emancipation under the communist state was widely acknowledged to have forced women to labor under the notorious double or triple burden. The fact that they were "liberated" from above has meant that many women did not view paid employment as a right or a privilege; instead it was no more than an obligation (Todorova 1993). Thus, when the post-communist state held up the possibility for women to shed this dual burden, many women did so happily, out of exhaustion at what they considered their "over-emancipation."

Moreover, jobs in the socialist economy were vertically segregated by sex and the majority of women were generally concentrated in the less prestigious and lower paying sectors of the economy, hardly making for empowering "careers." In addition, the "emancipation" of women and the explicit concern with men and women's equality is very much viewed as an anachronistic communist ideology. Current popular discourses blame women, in league with the communist state, as being collectively responsible for the demise of the ethnonation (Verdery 1996). The liberated woman is a threat to the traditions which are playing a central role in the reconstruction of national identities in the aftermath of communism's homogenizing glorification of a global proletariat. The nationalist slant of many post-socialist governments thus focuses on forcing women back into the home in order to symbolically liberate themselves from their shameful communist pasts.

These nationalist discourses which conflate women's liberation with socialism also tie in with popular beliefs that communism made women ugly and distorted their "natural" femininity (Svendsen 1996). New market dynamics that value beauty over competence for women workers further reinforce the notion that gender equality is both backward and undesirable. Another important factor is the difference in the construction of the private and public sphere in the East

and West (Funk and Mueller 1993, Einhorn 1993). Under socialism, individual agency was expressed primarily in the private sphere as opposed to the West where social and political autonomy came with one's participation in the public sphere.

Furthermore, many Bulgarian women have accepted their new roles in solidarity with their families, recognizing that men, too, have been negatively effected by the changes (Kostova 1993, Rueschemeyer 1994). Along these same lines, Petrova (1993) has suggested that although child care was still readily available in Bulgaria after the "revolution", the quality was poor and children suffered from neglect. Thus, both men and women would willingly spend more time with their children if given the chance. Given these circumstances, women have few incentives to separate their problems from the general problems of society, believing instead that cooperation between men and women is needed to overcome the obstacles presented by the transition from communism just as men and women worked together first for and then against the socialist state (Tomsic 1980). Socialism also did little to encourage women to cooperate outside of the official party organizations. In addition, Western feminism is seen as a hegemonic discourse that is not fully sensitive to the unique historical circumstances informing the current situation of women in the post-socialist world (Drakulic 1991).

Yet another factor to be considered is the Eastern European woman's relative inexperience with the new market conditions. Many women, used to moving in and out of the labor market at will, may not fully understand the possibility of permanent unemployment. The lack of an organized women's movement may also derive from the fact that former communist subjects have a very limited understanding of the role of civil society and that most non-governmental organizations are relatively new and isolated from the Bulgarian people (Snavey and Desai 1994). Most importantly, these NGOs are dependent on foreign donors for the vast

majority of their funds. The issues and priorities of the donors by necessity become the issues and priorities of the NGOs.

Cash strapped countries going through the process of economic and political restructuring are sensitive to the demands of foreign agents; especially when those foreign agents hold the key to opportunities for investment, credit, and economic integration. If these international organizations do not make women's issues a priority in their aid packages, there is little incentive for local governments or citizen's groups to focus on the gender ramifications of fiscal and/or political policies. In what follows, we will examine three current international organizations which are "helping" Bulgaria navigate its way through the restructuring process. Yet before we begin our analysis, let us briefly look at the evidence of how economic development and structural adjustment uniquely effects the role of women in society.

The Lessons of Women in Development (WID)

Family structures and power relationships between individuals are effected by large structural changes in the economies that govern their actions. Two key concepts in understanding women's roles in development focus on how to value women's work and increase the value of women's time (Tinker 1990, Kandiyoti 1988). Economic changes in developing countries can bring about imbalances in the distribution of power between men and women. We should therefore expect that the economic restructuring of nations in the former Eastern Bloc will also have significant effects on the dynamics of family bargaining (Sen 1990). Valentine Moghadam (1993) has indeed pointed out several similarities between economic restructuring in the "Third World" and the transition from communism in the former "Second World.

Development projects which aim to achieve macroeconomic stability and promote economic growth in both regions have the potential to place women at a disadvantage in the new system.

For instance, policies which aim to cut government spending often entail massive reductions in social services. This effects women in two key ways. Firstly, professional women tend to be concentrated in the public or state sector. As these sectors shrink, it is women who become disproportionately unemployed. On the other hand, as these services become unavailable, women are the ones who take up the responsibility. On the surface it may appear that a government is promoting free markets by reducing its social subsidies, but in essence it is simply reducing its own expenditures by exploiting the unpaid labor of women who will care for the young, the old and the sick when state services are no longer available.

Taking these factors into account, it is essential that governments and international organizations are sensitive to the gender ramifications of fiscal policies. Yet too often macroeconomic stability and balance of payments maintenance take precedence over social concerns. In Bulgaria, the economic crisis of the late 1990s and early 2000s has meant that international organizations have been preoccupied with "privatization" and "democratization," leaving precious little attention to be focused on the dilemmas of families living through these processes. Among the many reasons for women's lack of social organization, the role of international organizations must not be forgotten. In these turbulent times, national priorities are often being set in conjunction with outside expectations. Promises of foreign investment, export markets, and economic integration are shaping the priorities and concerns of the Bulgarian government.

In this way, international organizations are encouraging a selective "blindness" to the issues of women. By promoting policies which disproportionately effect women and not providing resources to address these imbalances, organizations like the IMF, the World Bank and

PHARE are reinforcing the common attitude that social issues are secondary to economic restructuring. Despite the clear evidence that structural adjustment has serious gender implications (Aslanbeigui et. al. 1994; Moghadam 1996; Funk and Mueller 1993; Einhorn 1993; Buckley 1997), international organizations are pursuing projects which ignore the unique situation of women in the post-communist world.

The introduction to the proceedings of a United Nations (1992) regional seminar on "The Impact of Economic and Political Reform on the Status of Women in Easter Europe" states:

"Without strong national machinery mobilizing information on women and making it available to both policy makers and to women themselves, it is unlikely that gender aspects of the reform process can be convincingly advocated... The pace of reform will be influenced by the kind of international cooperation - both technical and financial - that will be received. The question is how this cooperation can be oriented so as to ensure that it reaches and involves women... The main instrument is to ensure that gender analysis is made whenever a loan, a project or an agreement is proposed" (UNDP 1996:6).

And this is exactly what it *not* being done.

The remainder of this paper will focus on three of the international organizations currently working in Bulgaria. Although these examples are by no means comprehensive, they point to the obvious shortcomings of the international community and its lack of interest in women's issues. It is this gender blindness, in addition to the many factors mentioned above, which may be discouraging Bulgarian and other Eastern European women from effectively creating active civil organizations in response to economic and political marginalization.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF)

Bulgaria became a member of the IMF on September 25, 1990. As of April 1998, the government of Bulgaria had drawn over 2.3 billion dollars from the IMF. Combined with their other loans, Bulgaria's total external debt accounted for 81.6 per cent of GDP (World Bank 2000). This burgeoning debt has meant that Bulgarian fiscal policies have increasingly come under the control IMF "advisors." These advisors "encourage" the government of Bulgaria to pursue policies which will allow Bulgaria to maintain the interest payments on its foreign debt. In fact, the IMF has its office in Bulgaria in the Ministry of Finance and directly supervises the all fiscal decisions. The IMF defines its role in this process "as easing a country's painful transition to living within its means" (Driscoll 1996: 5).

As with stabilization policies in most countries one of the first goals is to reduce public expenditures and raise government revenues. In a press release after an IMF policy consultation with Bulgaria, IMF directors recognized the challenges of raising public revenues when the proper infrastructure for tax collection has not yet been established. The IMF concluded, "Since it would take time to improve revenue performance, Directors stressed the need for continued expenditure restraint. They therefore welcomed the plans to improve the targeting of the social safety net and the efforts to streamline public administration" (IMF 1997). By "targeting of the social safety net", the IMF means making these services available to fewer people, a policy which is bound to have social repercussions for women. "Efforts to streamline public administration" will mean that many women will lose their jobs since they make up the majority of workers in this sector. Yet neither the IMF nor the government of Bulgaria recognizes or addresses the gender implications of these policies.

In the "countries in transition" chapter of its 1997 Annual Report, the IMF targets all enterprises, including private and newly established ones, which "continue to provide some

social benefits in line with former practices." These social benefits include "housing, clinics, and kindergartens." The IMF explains:

"The provision of housing, education, and health care services by enterprises is likely to be inefficient and costly, since these activities typically fall outside the core competencies of the industries. To safeguard continued access and to ensure efficient provision of these services, enterprises should spin off the delivery of non wage benefits, transferring fixed assets where necessary to private providers, the public sector, or, in the case of housing, directly to households. Governments should gradually remove the implicit subsidies on a range of services and utilities and should aim instead at full cost recovery, while targeting social benefits to the less well-off households to ensure that the increase in cost to them is offset" (IMF 1997: 158).

This statement is packed with ideologies and attitudes which completely undermine the social support and autonomy women once had under communist rule. First of all, when the IMF talks about closing clinics and kindergartens it is directly jeopardizing the ability of women to remain competitive in the labor market. If the provision of these services is "inefficient and costly" the question we must ask is: "inefficient and costly" for who? If these activities fall out of the "core competencies of the industries" whose "core competencies" do they fall under? When the IMF talks about "full cost recovery" it means that women will now have to pay for child care services or themselves provide these services for free. Furthermore, the IMF ignorantly defines the household as one productive unit, proposing to offset the cost of these services for only the poorest households. Yet each household contains a man and a woman, and the relative "well-off-ness" of a household may be achieved because of the woman's unpaid domestic labor. To ignore the gender dynamics of these policies is to totally undermine the economic bargaining position of women in the family. Although many have argued that child care and maternity leaves make women less competitive in the market anyway, for the IMF not to

acknowledge or suggest strategies to deal with these family issues demonstrates both its lack of foresight and concern.

In the same document the IMF attacks the communist system of entitlements, "...pensions, family allowances, and social transfers - that was aimed at complementing low wages and redistributing income but was not specifically designed to prevent or alleviate poverty" (Ibid.: 161). Yet from the evidence presented earlier in this paper, it should be clear that many of these entitlements helped to support women's reproductive and productive roles. Characteristically, the IMF completely ignores the social ramifications of such policies and instead only focuses on the fiscal implications. Again, we must ask the question, poverty for who? The breadwinner/housewife model may be more efficient according to the IMF's qualifications, but at least it should make this explicit and not pretend that households are one, cohesive unit under the leadership of a "benevolent patriarch" to which income is redistributed when over 20 years of feminist theory and household economics have proven otherwise.

Although the IMF claims only to concern itself with macroeconomic stability and the smooth functioning of the international monetary system, the truth is that its policies have affected the day-to-day lives of millions of people around the world. As mentioned above, numerous studies (for example: Aslanbeigui et. al 1994, Beneria 1991, Elson 1991) have shown that the IMF's stabilization policies disproportionately effect women. Yet in spite of this, the IMF remains functionally gender blind.

The World Bank

The World Bank Annual Report for 1997 reported that "gender analysis and policy are strategically linked to economic and policy activities through integration into country assistance

strategies" (World Bank 1997). Since the Bank's commitment to implementing the recommendations of the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, it has at least on the surface began to take gender implications of its projects seriously for the first time. The Bank now considers gender one of its "Major Programs" and established a Gender Consultative Group responsible for issues concerning women and development. This group is designed to help the Bank both address and assess the Bank's gender related policies and programs. Although this is definitely a step in the right direction, gender integration has yet to become a feature of all Bank programs.

Moreover, in the 147 pages of the 1996 World Development Report, *From Plan to Market*, only one small text box was dedicated to the discussion of women's issues. The report clearly states that:

"Transition affects women much differently in some ways than it does men... Women are no longer seen as having a social duty to work, but reform has also brought a dramatic decline in affordable child care facilities and a deterioration in health care systems. In addition, economic hardship and uncertainty during transition make it more difficult to feed and clothe the family-- responsibilities that have always fallen predominantly to women in these countries... Moreover, women's employment choices may be constrained by increased labor market discrimination, as evidenced by layoffs of women before men and open discrimination in job advertisements" (World Bank 1996).

Although the Bank does recognize the plight of women and suggests that "...policy should focus on increasing choices for women" (Ibid.: 72) the evidence shows that it does not heed its own advice.

By May 1998, the World Bank had financed nine projects in Bulgaria.⁴ Each of the project reports for these programs included a rationale for Bank involvement, sustainability assessments, and an overview of the potential environmental impacts. But at least two of these

projects, those for Agricultural Development and Health Sector Restructuring, had the potential of disproportionately effecting women. In neither case, however, did the Bank incorporate a gender analysis into its program outline.

The Agricultural Development projects aims to privatize collective farms and reorient the Bulgarian agriculture sector towards export. In order to do this the Bank is encouraging the development of land markets. The beneficiaries of this project are supposedly private farmers who will now own their land and reap their own profits. Studies have shown, however, that the break up of collective farming and the return to family farms in China has resulted in the rebirth of patriarchal structures in the countryside and a diminished status for women (Davin 1987 and Kelkar 1988). The privatization of agriculture in Bulgaria does not necessarily mean that women will be made worse off, but the potential does exist for agricultural labor to become an unpaid addition to women's domestic responsibilities. The Bank, however, has failed to explicitly address questions of who will own the land and whose labor will be exploited to work it.

The Health Sector Restructuring Project aims to "...support Government efforts to introduce incentives to control costs and rationalize staffing patterns..." to further enhance "the fiscal sustainability of the public health system" (World Bank 1998: 1). As mentioned earlier, women employees tend to be concentrated in the health and education sectors, and attempts to "rationalize staffing patterns" means that there will be fewer jobs for women. Furthermore, incentives to control costs will most likely include attempts to improve "efficiency" by shifting the paid labor of health care workers into the realm of the unpaid labor of women. While the Bank proclaims that "no adverse impact on the environment is expected from the project," (Ibid: 1) it is ignoring the obvious gender implications any health sector project would have on women in Bulgaria.

More recently, in the *Bulgaria Country Economic Memorandum: The Dual Challenge of Transition and Accession*, the World Bank makes specific policy recommendations to the Bulgarian government on programs that directly benefit women without once considering the potential ramifications. In fact, the entire 200 page document scarcely mentions women. Nor are they included among those most hurt by transition: children, the elderly, the disabled and ethnic minorities. Despite the grandiose claims of the Gender Consultative Group, many recommendations, which obviously effect women are made without parallel suggestions as to deal with the policy's impact on women. For example, in its chapter on Labor Market and Social Policy, the Bank writes:

"Like other countries in the region, Bulgaria's social assistance system is over reliant on residential care for the elderly who are unable to live on their own, adults with physical and mental disabilities, and children in different circumstances due to poverty, ethnicity, disability and other risk factors. The Ministry [of Labor and Social Policy] recognizes the limitations of this approach, both in adequately assisting groups at need, and efficiently providing services, and is developing a strategy to shift to community-based options" (World Bank 2000: 70).

It is clear that "community-based options" is a clever synonym for women. Traditionally in Bulgarian culture, it is always the women who look after the elderly, the sick and the very young. The heavy reliance on institutionalized care in Bulgaria was one of the ways in which the socialist state lessened women's domestic responsibilities thus allowing them to take paid employment outside the home. As this system of care disappears, women's domestic duties will increase, For this, they will be uncompensated (not to mention the relatively unpleasant nature of the work). Furthermore, hospitals and institutions provided the necessary food and medicines to their patients. Considering that two-thirds of the Bulgarian poor are already women (WAD 2000), this policy of closing care facilities will only serve to aggravate the already difficult

situation for women. They will now have to share their increasingly scarce household resources amongst a greater number of mouths.

The PHARE Programme

The PHARE Programme is an initiative of the European Community which supports countries in their transition from communism. Through grant financing to partner countries, PHARE supports economic restructuring and fosters the building of democracy. The goal of the Programme is to develop the necessary conditions for the eventual expansion of the European Union to include countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Bulgaria is one of the countries, which has signed a "Europe Agreement." These agreements are frameworks outlining the political and economic conditions that must be met before full membership in the EU can be granted. Established in 1989, the Programme is the largest grant assistance program to Central and Eastern Europe.

The European Union also considers gender equity as one of its main objectives and strives to promote the equality of men and women in all of the accession states with whom the European Union (EU) has signed "Europe Agreements." They write:

"Gender equality is an integral part of the enlargement process... The [European] Commission has stressed throughout the enlargement process that there can be no membership without the guarantees of equal rights for women and men and the machinery to enforce these rights" (Commission of European Communities 2000: 24).

Despite their lofty intentions, the PHARE Program has done little to promote or support women's issues in Bulgaria. A particularly salient example of its policy bias against women is the concentration of resources in the over 70 Business Support Centres operating in Central and

Eastern Europe. These centers are the result of three multiyear projects to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the region. The centres provide information to help local entrepreneurs set up SMEs and provides technical assistance to "contribute to the emergence of a viable private sector" (PHARE 1998). Yet this support is primarily targeted at men since the research has clearly shown that women are much less likely to start businesses, preferring instead the stability and security of the public sector. Of the 87,750 private firms established in 1989, only 145 or 1.7 percent were owned by women (National Statistical Institute 1991). More recently, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) found that only 13 per cent of Bulgarian women planed to start their own business compared to 16.5 per cent of Bulgarian men. Furthermore, only 6.3 per cent of women had already tried to start a business by 1999 as opposed to 11.6 per cent of men (UNDP 1999).

According to an earlier survey by UNDP (1996), 80 percent of the women respondents claimed that work in both the business and family spheres is hard to combine, partially or totally incompatible. When asked if they *would like* to start their own business only 18.8 percent of women said yes compared to 31.9 percent of men. The tendency for women to abstain from entrepreneurship is bound up in a variety of social and cultural factors. The UNDP Human Development Report on Bulgaria (1996) states:

"The risk of private business failure is not neutral in respect to gender. Every second male respondent visualizes the 'ideal entrepreneur' as being a man. Only 10 percent of women see the ideal entrepreneur as a woman. These ideas mirror traditional stereotypes, according to which women are performers rather than innovators; submissive rather than aggressive; emotional rather than rational. These characteristics result in the formation of cultural barriers to the success of women entrepreneurs" (Ibid.: 26).

The UNDP recommends that special measures sensitive to women's specific needs be implemented by the establishment of special funds and programs targeted at women

entrepreneurs. Posadskaya-Vanderbeck (1998) has also suggested that Eastern European women may be averse to owning businesses because of the "corruption, criminalization, and lack of moral values" which has accompanied the privatization process in many countries. Surveys have also shown (UNDP 1999) that women prefer to seek employment in the state sector, both for themselves and for their children, than to work in the private sector. Furthermore, in March 1999, 59 per cent of all female employees in Bulgaria were working in public enterprises compared to only 31.7 who were working in the private sector (National Statistical Institute 1999).

Despite the evidence, however, the PHARE Programme continues to focus its effort on small to medium sized businesses without consideration of the inherent gender bias. That the largest provider of grant aid has not yet considered women's issues as a priority is indicative of the invisibility of gender in the restructuring economies. Once again, it is understandable that women in these nations, including Bulgaria, might feel that their concerns are marginal given the inattention of the international community.

Conclusion

In Eastern Europe today, the social, political and economic future of Bulgaria and other post-communist nations is being shaped by the capital infusions (or lack thereof) of the bi- and multilateral aid community. The integration of Bulgaria into the global economy is being mediated by "experts" who claim to be doing what is best for the Bulgarian people, when in fact, the Bulgarian people are rarely taken into account. Given these dynamics, it must be admitted that both men and women are experiencing a drastic decline in their standards of living. It would be very wrong to assume that men are sailing through the transition from communism unscathed.

But the evidence is clear; Bulgarian women have it worse. As the privatization "festivities" continue, women will be put at an even greater structural disadvantage than they now face. And if the international organizations continue to remain insensitive to gender issues in their programs, the state will have little incentive to address growing political and economic imbalances. This lack of national or international support eventually trickles down to the grass-roots level salting the once potentially fertile soil of civil society. If the epidemic gender blindness of international organizations continues, women will continue to be marginalized and there will be yet another factor discouraging them from actively mobilizing for their increasingly threatened social, political and economic rights.

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¹This paper is an abbreviated version of a longer, more detailed paper on the same subject that includes an analysis of USAID and the Open Society Institute. Questions and/or comments can be directed to the author at eustacia@uclink4.berkeley.edu.

² A report funded by the Foreign Investment Advisory Service (FIAS) on Administrative barriers to foreign investment dedicates one chapter to complaints about the generosity of the Labor Code toward Bulgarian workers and implicitly to benefits afforded to women and elder workers. One example of a FIAS complaint is the inability of employers to dismiss, without the prior consent of the Labor Inspectorate "...pregnant women and women with children under three years of age (FIAS 1999:27)."

³ For an interesting and thorough examination of the problem see:

<http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/papers/traffickingreport.html> for the Trafficking Report.

⁴ These projects were: Debt and Debt Service Reduction, District Heating, Energy II, Environmental Liability Pilot Project, Irrigation Restructuring and Rehabilitation, Railway Rehabilitation, Water Companies Restructuring and Modernization, Agricultural Development, and Health Sector Restructuring.