Abstract

There is little doubt that the transformation currently taking place in former centrally-planned economies (CPEs) will be accompanied by rising inequality. Although much of the critical discussion of this issue has focused on the class basis of this increase, a growing body of feminist work emphasizes the ways in which rising class inequality is likely to be accompanied by increased gender inequality. In this paper, I use survey and interview data gathered in Bulgaria to examine the impact of the agricultural decollectivization on women.

The analysis is used to shed light on the relationship between state policy (before and after the transition) and gender inequality, and on the likely impact of the privatization of agricultural production on persisting inequality. I find that current conditions encourage a class-gender alliance, between rural women as a group and those households which will soon make up the rural poor. I conclude by outlining a set of measures which such a class-gender alliance could encourage the state to undertake to reduce the negative impact of decollectivization on women agricultural workers.

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Downwardly Mobile: Women in the Decollectivization of East European Agriculture

by

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DOWNWARDLY MOBILE: WOMEN IN THE DECOLLECTIVIZATION OF EAST EUROPEAN AGRICULTURE

There is little doubt that the transformations currently taking place in former centrally-planned economies (CPEs) will be accompanied by rising inequality. Much of the critical discussion of this issue has focused on the class basis of this increase--inequality emerging between new owners of capital and the rest of the working population (e.g., Ost 1993). Nonetheless, a growing body of feminist work has emphasized the ways in which rising class inequality in the transition in likely to be accompanied by increased gender inequality (Baer 1993; Verdery 1993).

Clearly, state socialism fell far short of creating gender equality. The persistence of occupational segregation and unequal pay is well-documented (Baer 1993:32; Meurs 1993), as is the role of the state in perpetuating an unequal division of labor in the household (Duggan 1993; Meurs 1993). Women did, however, enjoy increased access to education, basic medical and childcare services, and guaranteed employment, all of which supported a degree of economic independence and equality.

For some women, state socialist development policy meant even greater benefits. With rapid industrialization, technological change, and the expansion of the service sector, a large number of white-collar jobs were created in areas traditionally dominated by women, such as health care and education, and in completely new areas, such as skilled, agricultural jobs, which were not yet gender-defined. In these spheres, women were able to advance quickly to quite highly paid and responsible work.

With the end of the state socialist experiment, a substantial amount of backlash has occurred against these relative advances by women. In Hungary, for example, political groups exhort men to reclaim their "natural" role as provider and family authority, while women return to their proper nurturing role (Goven 1992). This dynamic is accompanied by the withdrawal of social services for women, such as abortion and childcare, which made it possible for women to pursue careers alongside men, despite the traditional division of household labor.

The backlash draws on traditional conceptions, unchallenged by state socialism, of the male as the "main" worker which were reinforced by state policy (Duggan 1993). New private and state employers participate in enforcing the new norms by explicitly discriminating against women, even in jobs in which women dominated under central planning, such as janitor and medical assistant (Baer 1993:43).

Some women are also participating in the backlash--voluntarily withdrawing from the labor force in response to their unhappy experience with the double burden of housework and paid work (Baer 1993:40). In Bulgaria, however, a recent poll showed that only 20

percent of working women would voluntarily withdraw from the labor force, even if they could afford to do so (Bobeva 1991:19).

There are also important structural factors which contribute to rising gender inequality during the transformation, independently of the changing norms. One of the most important is the structure of occupational segregation established under central planning. Those areas offering many of the best jobs to women--health, education, and technical services--are precisely those under the greatest pressure from the push to eliminate "unaffordable" services from the budgets of the state and private employers.[1]

One particular example of this dynamic can be seen in agriculture. In this paper, I use Bulgarian data to examine the condition of women working in Eastern European collective agriculture and the likely impact of the transformation on these women. Bulgarian agriculture was among the most highly collectivized in Eastern Europe, and the experience of Bulgarian agricultural women is illustrative of those working in East European collective agriculture.[2]

The Bulgarian data indicate that not only are agricultural women becoming unemployed more rapidly than men, but women are also facing the selective elimination of the few skilled, better-paid jobs to which they had access. Combined with weak employment opportunities outside of agriculture, these changes are likely to greatly increase gender inequality.

While inequality by class is also rising, the change in women's employment opportunities is likely to reduce class inequality among women. Unfortunately, there is little chance of this resulting in active resistance on the part of a broad group of rural women, given the history of anti-feminism in Eastern Europe. It does, however, create favorable conditions for an alliance between new private farmers and skilled women agricultural workers. In the final section of the paper, I consider the possibility of such an alliance and its potential to promote state policy which would partially combat rising gender inequality among agricultural workers.

Theoretical Background: Gender Inequality Under Plan and Market

In a market economy, an individual's access to employment and level of remuneration are theoretically determined by property ownership and skills. Under these conditions, legal, institutional and cultural norms may perpetuate inequality between groups by enforcing inequalities in property and skill acquisition. Even if groups bring relatively equal property and skills to the labor market, however, norms of discrimination in hiring and remuneration will still generate inequalities between groups.

Where legal or cultural norms produce inequalities in labor market preparation or access by gender, these will, in turn, affect power relations in the home. As women's

independent income rises, for example, this is likely to contribute to somewhat greater bargaining power for women in the home (Blumberg 1988; McCrate 1987).

Under central planning, the state is expected to intervene to reduce inequality. The most common form of intervention is through state ownership of capital, which limits inequalities resulting from unequal access to property. The state also has central control over education, the media, and employment, which can be used to promote equality in skills acquisition and hiring and to influence social norms. As labor market options and state policy influence, in turn, bargaining power within the household (Baer 1993:20), the state has the potential to mitigate inequalities both among and within households. In one example of effective use of state institutions, the socialist state altered traditional gender norms in order to decrease the educational gap between rural women and men. In 1934, 57 percent of rural women were illiterate, compared to 39 percent of rural men. By 1967, only six percent of rural women were illiterate, compared to four percent of rural men (Statistical Yearbook 1942:35).

Clearly, however, the state may also choose to not use its control to promote gender equality. Whether institutional power is so used will depend on other goals of the state, as well as the gender interests of the state itself, and the level of political pressure from other gender-interested groups (Folbre 1992).

The extent to which state socialist governments influence both the distribution of skills and social norms plays an important role in the way East European women will experience the transition to a market economy. Where women have continued to face unequal access to skills and property and norms of discrimination have persisted, the transitions from direct state control to market allocation, and from socialist norms to "normality," will exacerbate gender inequalities unless countervailing measures are taken.

The Meaning of Agricultural Collectivization for Bulgarian Women

Collectivization and state socialist development policy did encourage the reduction of gender inequality in a number of ways. By socializing land and actively incorporating women into paid labor, collectivization increased paid employment among women and increased recognition of women's agricultural labor.

In Bulgaria, women played a significant role in agricultural production prior to collectivization. Women hoed and weeded certain crops, kept vegetable gardens and small livestock, and helped with all crops at harvest time. Although much of this work was done independently of men, in women's mutual aid groups, men were considered the principle farmers. Women were permitted to market vegetables, butter, and eggs, but grain and large livestock production were men's to market. Women could, in principle, own and inherit land, but sons generally inherited twice as much as daughters, and daughters often forfeited to their brothers their claims to land (Sanders 1938:54-55).

Collectivization formalized women's employment and thus expanded both women's visibility in agricultural production and the share of their work subject to remuneration. According to the official statistics, women's importance in the agricultural labor force increased from 40 percent of agricultural workers in 1942, to approximately 67 percent of collective farm workers in 1967 (CSO 1967; Statistical Yearbook 1942:37).[3] The collective farms attempted to monitor the labor input of each individual and guaranteed women equal pay for equal work.[4]

In order to encourage women to participate in the labor market, the state extended child care, and in the early 1970s, maternity benefits, to farm workers. Women were also encouraged to increase their level of education. While 57 percent of women were illiterate in 1937, compared to 39 percent of men (Statistical Yearbook 1942:35), by 1967 only six percent of rural women were illiterate, compared to four percent of men (Institute of Sociology 1967). In addition to increasing labor market equality, these developments may have contributed to somewhat greater gender equality in the home, as increased income gave women improved bargaining positions within the household.

At the same time, however, substantial gender inequality persisted. While the state exercised near-complete control over education and employment, efforts to reduce inequalities in employment opportunities were quite limited.

As agriculture was mechanized, occupational segregation by gender prevented most women from benefitting from the increasing number of tractors and other machines. Although the vast majority of agricultural workers continued to use only hand tools as mechanization progressed, women found themselves disproportionately represented among this majority of manual laborers. By 1986, an estimated 66 percent of female agricultural workers continued to rely only on hand tools, as opposed to 35 percent of male members (Institute of Sociology 1986).

Very few women gained access to the most mechanized and best paid jobs. Although women comprised 49 percent of the agricultural labor force in 1985, they made up only two to four percent of the highest-paying jobs as tractor driver, machinist and combine driver. In the less mechanized areas of vegetable, fruit, and tobacco production, however, women comprised the majority (73 to 76 percent) of the work force. Although no data is available on average wages by gender, an existing breakdown of wages by job category suggests that average wages for women agricultural workers are well below those for men (see Table 1).

Weak labor market opportunities limited increases in women's bargaining power in the home, reinforcing the persisting inequality in the distribution of household labor. In rural areas, this labor includes substantial amounts of work in the subsistence agricultural on "self-sufficiency plots," and the processing of production for household consumption. Including labor in growing, canning and curing this production, as well as housework, one study reported that women spent 35.8 hours per week in unpaid labor, compared to 13.9 hours for men (IATUR 1991).

For some women, however, collective agriculture offered much greater opportunities for improving their position economically and within the household. The creation of large, mechanized units of production generated a substantial number of new technical and administrative jobs, with the number of these jobs rising from 21,293 in 1960 to 91,939 in 1985 (CSO 1987). These new, white-collar agricultural jobs were characterized by specialization, and average pay for white-collar agricultural workers ranged from 18 percent above that for blue collar agricultural workers in 1971, to nine percent above that for blue collar workers in 1985 (see Table 2).

Many of the white-collar jobs were either relatively new and not strongly gender-typed, as in the case of agronomist, or were jobs traditionally considered acceptable for women, as in the case of secretarial work and bookkeeping. As a result, women gained relatively easy access to these jobs. In 1985, women comprised 39 percent of the white-collar labor force in agriculture, with 11 percent of all women working in agriculture employed in the better paid white-collar jobs (see Table 2)

The new technical and administrative sectors were not immune from occupational segregation, however. Gender breakdowns of white-collar employees reveal that women are very weakly represented in certain jobs, such as management and veterinarian, where men comprise 91 percent and 86 percent of the employees, respectively. In other jobs, however, women were more heavily concentrated. Bookkeepers and normers, for example, are 85 percent and 78 percent female, respectively (see Table 2).

Not surprisingly, women are concentrated at the lower end of the pay scale. In the best paid white-collar jobs of farm management, veterinarian, head specialist, engineer, and agronomist, women comprise approximately 21 percent of the labor force. In the low-paying jobs of cleaner and doorperson, secretary, basic bookkeeping, normer and cashier, women comprise approximately 87 percent of the labor force (see Table 3).

Still, women have much greater access to the best white-collar jobs. In the best paid and most prestigious jobs in farm management, women comprised 18 percent of the work force in 1985, well above the four to six percent participation women achieved in the best paid blue-collar jobs. These jobs paid well, and provided creative and responsible work for rural women (CSO 1988).

Interviews conducted in the summer of 1991 also suggest that women with responsible positions in farm management participated to a relatively limited extent in food production for home use (Field Notes 1991). While still doing most of the housework, these women thus achieved somewhat greater equality in the distribution of household labor.

Decollectivization and Women

Under the current Land Law, collective farm holdings will be returned to their pre-collectivization owners, resulting in a radical change in the structure of Bulgarian farms.

Prior to collectivization, land was held in small units. In 1934, for example, each farm held an average of 17 units, each averaging 0.4 hectares (CDIA 165/1/82:4, 1938/39) for a total of under seven hectares per holding. There were few large units: only 11 percent of the holdings were larger than 10 hectares, and only 1.5 percent were larger than 20 ha. (Statistical Yearbook 1939). Under the decollectivization law, the old units will be further divided among the many children and grandchildren of the original owners.

Fragmented holdings resembling those of 1934 are unlikely to result. Some parcels will be grouped into larger holdings, as urban heirs choose not to return to farming and instead lease the land to family members or other villagers. In other places, people's inability to afford new, small-scale machinery is encouraging the formation of cooperatives, in which contiguous, individually-owned parcels can be cultivated collectively using the available machinery.

These new, multi-owner farming units are unlikely to replicate the scale and complexity of the old collective farms, however. In many places, large-scale production cooperatives are being explicitly discouraged by local political forces. Perhaps more importantly, demand for agricultural goods is weak, as a result of the widespread economic recession in the old Soviet trading bloc and the general saturation of global agricultural markets. In this context, private investors hesitate to lay out the working capital needed to run a large-scale agricultural enterprise.

The emerging productive structure of private, small-scale, often family-based units will have a significant impact on the working conditions of both women and men. For both women and men working in agriculture, decollectivization will mean the loss of significant social welfare benefits associated with state employment, such as pensions, paid vacation, and subsidized cantines. For women, this will also mean the loss of maternity leave.

As paid labor is replaced by work within the structure of the patriarchal family, many women will also lose in terms of recognition and direct remuneration for their work. In China, the centrally-planned economy which has progressed furthest in decollectivizing agricultural production, researchers have noted that in family production, where labor input is measured informally, women are again "seen as 'just helping'" (Davin 1988:97).

In Bulgaria, women's customary rights to own land, organize informal women's work groups, and earn income from garden plots, may limit the degree of their subordination in the family farm. Even in the most egalitarian households, Bulgarian men may feel that, as one husband in a Chinese family complained, "Now that [my wife] handles everything inside and outside the house, I've been reduced to her farmhand" (Xiao Ming 1983 in Davin 1988:97).[5] Women in such households may actually have greater access to independent income with decollectivization, as they specialize in lucrative vegetables and small livestock production.

Interviews in Bulgaria during the summer of 1993, however, suggest that this is unlikely to be the dominant dynamic. In three villages in different regions, we found no new, independent women farmers, although women were often reported to be "helping" their husbands. As to who makes household decisions about farming, new farmers most often responded: "The man, of course" (Field Notes 1993). With the reduction in direct remuneration from paid employment, women are also likely to lose bargaining power within the household.

Substantial additional blows to agricultural workers will also result from the elimination of skilled, technical and administrative jobs which will accompany the breakup of the large-scale production units. As with cuts in state employment in general, cuts in these jobs will hurt agricultural workers of both genders. And, because men still control the majority of the best white-collar jobs, a greater absolute number of men may be affected than women. Nonetheless, the loss of these jobs will be particularly damaging to women for two reasons.

First, women are likely to suffer disproportionately because of the particular structures of occupational segregation. Men, with their skills as drivers and mechanics for agricultural machines, have had some excellent blue-collar job options, and they appear likely to retain them despite the restructuring. As tractors make their way into the private sector, for example, their drivers often accompany them as contract employees. These drivers are indispensable, because they know the secrets of making the out-dated machines work, especially in the absence of spare parts.

Due to the persistence of traditional perceptions of what constitutes "appropriate" work for women, women are much more likely to obtain technical education in the areas of secretarial work, bookkeeping, or agronomy (see Nickel, 1993, for a discussion of this dynamic in the former German Democratic Republic). These skills are less often employed by the new private farmers. Farming households themselves have few bookkeeping skills, and many of those interviewed during 1993 kept only the most rudimentary accounts of their operations (Field Notes 1993). Although they are experimenting with many new crops and inputs, farming households also do without technical advice. Many of the skills which women agricultural workers have to offer would thus increase the efficiency of the new farming units. Unfortunately, these services are unavailable to most farming households under the current conditions.

Second, the loss of white-collar agricultural jobs will disproportionately affect women because of the persistence of cultural norms which consider men to be the main breadwinners and women to be secondary workers. Skilled women are being displaced much more rapidly than men; although women comprised nine percent of management and 34 percent of specialists in 1985 (the most recent available data), as of April 30, 1993 they comprised 25 percent 52 percent of unemployed managers and specialists respectively (see Table 3).

There are few options available to these women which will allow them to preserve the gains they have made in income and status. Much of the rural industry built by the state socialist government has collapsed in the face of new policies and market forces, and national labor markets must contend with more than 120,000 unemployed specialists and more than 50,000 unemployed persons with university educations (Ministry of Labor 1993).

Independent private farming, perhaps the obvious option for those women with technical agricultural skills, will also be difficult for them to develop. One problem is that skilled women agricultural workers have less background in private farming. Whereas 61 percent of women working in unskilled agricultural jobs earned income from private production in 1986, only 33 percent of skilled women agricultural workers earned such income (Town and Village 1986). This difference is not surprising, because as full-time, salaried employees, these white-collar workers had less time to devote to household production than blue-collar workers, whose work varied more on a daily basis.

A second complicating factor in white-collar women's entrance into private farming has to do with access to property. Land will be returned to families in the village where the owner lived at the time of collectivization. Skilled white-collar workers, who have trained in a central city, are now much more likely than their blue-collar counterparts to live far from the village of their parents and grandparents. Farming their own land will thus mean moving to a distant village where they may have few of the social contacts necessary to begin independent farming. Renting land is an option, but relatively few households currently rent land out, and those that do prefer to rent to family members (Field Notes 1993).

Conclusion

As we have seen, the state socialist government fell far short of eliminating gender inequality in the workplace or the home. Nonetheless, collective farming did increase the visibility of women's work in agriculture and increase women's access to income generated by their work. In addition, it created a number of white-collar jobs in agriculture which provided better-paid, higher-status work to some women than was available in blue-collar jobs.

With decollectivization and the transition to a market economy, many of these gains are likely to be lost. Women find themselves disadvantaged in their access to property, as persisting inequalities in gender relations within households contribute to unequal control over redistributed farm property. Further, the structure of occupational segregation under central planning has left women with skills which are much more difficult to transfer to private sector agriculture.

Both mid-career women and men are being marginalized from the labor force in Eastern Europe to such an extent that this group is being dubbed the "lost generation" (Baer 1993). But with social norms justifying disproportionately higher rates of dismissal for

women, the loss of access to the better jobs is likely to become more than a generational problem. Once the presence of women in skilled agricultural work has been sufficiently reduced, the way is opened for these positions to become "men's jobs."

The level of gender inequality will be strongly affected by this truncating of women's income-earning opportunities, while the degree of inequality among women will be reduced. Because women are being systematically excluded from the new upper class of "biznessmen," as they are being called, inequalities among women, defined by their own income, are likely to decrease, while at the same time, differences among household incomes to which women belong will increase. Consequently, in class terms women will differ, but in gender terms they will homogenize. This compression of women's incomes and choices appears unlikely to generate a united political force for protecting women's gains. The long history of anti-feminist rhetoric in Eastern Europe, combined with the current backlash, makes it difficult for women to understand themselves as a social group with particular interests and rights.

Income differentials among agricultural households are also increasing, however, and this creates the possibility of another type of political alliance which could help to preserve some of women's gains. Many of the less-skilled farming households could benefit greatly from the skills which the specialists have to offer. An alliance between the weaker agricultural households and skilled agricultural workers, around the concrete goal of protecting agricultural extension services, is thus possible.

Poorly developed markets, uncertainty, and financial constraints in the farming sector, make it unlikely that extension services will emerge from market stimulai alone. Government support will be needed to coordinate and subsidize these services and to assure that equal opportunity practices protect women's access to the jobs in this sector.

In the current ideological context, neither role for the state is unproblematic. However, the state has a unique opportunity. Patterns of household organization and farming are in a process of radical transformation, and state policy can have a particularly strong influence in either reinforcing or eroding patriarchal norms of prerogative and control.

The economic and social benefits of such a policy are clear. The policy of promoting agricultural extension work with equal employment opportunity for the many available women technicians would limit government expenditure compared to the alternatives of retraining workers and creating employment in new branches. At the same time, it would contribute to economic recovery, by encouraging a more productive use of women's labor and of other agricultural resources.

The policy would also offer clear political benefits to reform governments. Currently, significant anti-privatization sentiment has stalled reform in the countryside. Potential private farmers resist privatization due to uncertainty regarding their ability to farm successfully. Agricultural technicians and administrators resist because of the threat

privatization poses to their livelihood. Women technicians are an important part of this alliance.

The offer to protect a share of skilled agricultural jobs through the creation of an extension service could bring parts of both groups into line behind the reform. Such an extension service could also be designed to offer explicit assistance to unskilled farm women, in order to raise their access to independent income.

Whether the state can play this role remains an open question. Although there are clear economic and political reasons to protect the gains of white-collar agricultural women, the gender interests and urban bias of the male-dominated state have prevented serious consideration of these issues to date. Any change in state policy will likely depend on the strength of the emerging alliance--on the ability of skilled agricultural workers and new farms to unite across the lines of both class and gender.

Notes

1. See Bergmann (1993) for a discussion of the use of the term "affordability" in political discussions over benefit reduction and restructuring in the United States economy.

2. There are, of course, significant differences in the collectivization experiences of Eastern European countries. With respect to women's participation in agriculture, however, the similarities among those Eastern European countries with collectivized agriculture (Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia) are significant.

3. Collective farms controlled approximately 87 percent of farm land. Women comprised 47 percent of the labor force on state farms, which farmed approximately eight percent of agricultural land (Dobrin 1973).

4. Pay was first calculated according to the work day, and later according to task, but no distinction was made between the value of men's and women's working days.

5. Note the persistence of the double burden.

Table 1

Occupational Segregation by Gender
Blue Collar Agricultural Workers, 1985

	Men	Women	% Men	% Women	Average Pay
Tractor Driver/ Machinist	57,406	1,001	0.98	0.02	310
Combine Driver	1,995	83	0.96	0.04	488
Grain Worker	33,435	103,428	0.24	0.76	157
Tobacco Worker	32,375	88,337	0.27	0.73	157
Vegetable/ Fruit Worker	15,237	47,442	0.24	0.76	157

Sources: CSO 1987, 1988

Table 2

Occupational Segregation by Gender
White Collar Agricultural Workers*

	Men	Women	% Men	% Women	Average Pay
Management	9,611	929	0.91	0.09	380
Veterinarian	2,795	444	0.86	0.14	272
Head Specialist	781	247	0.76	0.24	299
Engineer	9,348	3,513	0.73	0.27	249
Agronomist	6,004	2,476	0.71	0.29	252
TOTAL	**28,539**	**7,609**	**0.79**	**0.21**	**291****
Normer	124	428	0.22	0.78	188
Bookkeeper	10	57	0.15	0.85	207
Cleaner/ Doorman	708	4,405	0.14	0.86	161
Cashier	506	3,311	0.13	0.87	167
Secretary	8	663	0.01	0.99	156
TOTAL	**1,356**	**8,864**	**0.13**	**0.87**	**165****

*Selected Occupations
**Weighted Average

Source: CSO 1987, 1988

Table 3

Participation and Unemployment of Women in Agriculture
by Selected Class of Work

	Share of Employees 1985	Share of Unemployed 1993
Management	0.09	0.25
Specialist	0.34	0.52
Worker	0.46	0.52

Sources: CSO 1987; Ministry of Labor 1993

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