

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DO-18

Kafkova 15
160 000 Praha 6
Czechoslovakia
Tel: 32 11 32

April 30, 1992

WOMEN AND MEN, PART 2: JOBS AND MONEY

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current Affairs
4 W. Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755
USA

Dear Peter and friends:

In my last newsletter, I took a stab at defining what kind of role Czechoslovak women play in their society. That role was tied not just to political and cultural factors, but to economic ones as well. I mentioned how women were pushed to work when socialism needed a large labor force. The idea, and the law, was everyone working to "build socialism."

The appearance of no unemployment eventually resulted in what's called over-employment -- too many people drawing salaries, not enough for them to do. Most of those salaries were low, and women's salaries were a necessary part of the family budget. But while men were not the sole providers under socialism, they were considered the main breadwinners. Women's wages were considered supplementary.

Women themselves thought of their work and salaries as less important than men's. They didn't strive for promotions. They didn't complain about performing menial, routine tasks because "that's no kind of work for a man to be doing."

Dagmar Obereigner is an Institute fellow studying political and social change in Eastern Europe, with a focus on Czechoslovakia.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Government statistics do not break up occupational status by gender. But sociological and economic surveys indicate that in the late 1980s, just 14 percent of the total female work force in Czechoslovakia worked in management positions. Sixty-five percent of those women were in lower-level management, 25 percent in mid-level, and 10 percent in top management.

Women keep telling me they didn't WANT to be in management all those years. One reason is time. Women gave up advancement at work in favor of more time with their families. Another thing to keep in mind is that socialism didn't exactly inspire or reward initiative, creativity and productivity. On the contrary. So why aspire to management? Working was just a way to make money. "I pretend to work, and they pretend to pay me," was the motto.

But regardless of the job, was -- and is -- pay equal for both sexes? In 1988, the latest year for which statistics were available, women in Czechoslovakia earned an average of 70 percent of what men made. Alena Kroupová, a researcher at the federal Department of Labor, notes that this statistic doesn't always mean there's no equal pay for equal work. Her research shows that after college, women start out with about the same earnings as men. Their income drops as they have children. They work fewer hours, sometimes part time, and usually are the ones who stay home with the children when the youngsters are sick (Medical insurance pays for it).

But over and over, women tell me they know of men who are doing the same kind of work as they are but getting a higher salary. Labor law and the constitution forbid this. But Kroupová says that of course it goes on. An employer can always come up with a reason why a man should be paid more. This of course especially discriminates against groups such as single, childless women, divorcees and widows. And it doesn't take single mothers into account. Kroupová says 7-8 percent of households with children in this country have only one parent, usually the mother.

I'm told women are "resigned" to this, although I do see indications that young women just entering the work force may be more assertive. Kroupová says women kept quiet in the past because they usually decided the advantages of their being able to shop on work time or leave early because of the kids outweighed the need to make waves. It will be interesting to see what happens when women stop getting such breaks. I'm already seeing evidence that private employers are not so understanding.

Even if a woman did take a wage dispute to court, Kroupová says, existing laws would not help her win. To remedy this, Kroupová calls for legislation that will really guarantee equality. She also says an ombudsman system would help, so that women could voice job concerns without fear. But she says most important is education, about issues such as giving women's work the value it



Photos © Dagmar Obereigner

Young mothers window-shopping in my neighborhood. Young women often drop out of the work force for years so they can raise children. If women do make it to management positions, it tends to be after the children are grown. And even older women seldom get to top management before retirement.

is due, and recognizing that both parents should play a significant role in the raising of children.

Women also say they rejected job advancement in the past because being in management meant closer ties to the regime. Women could reject that possibility more easily than men, they tell me. They could say they needed more time for family.

"A guy could of course refuse (promotion), but it was difficult," says sociologist Jiřina Šiklová. "The woman said, 'But I have children.' She could slip out of it."

If she didn't have children, she could get pregnant. This was one way to stop pressure to join the Communist Party, for example. The party actively recruited some people, especially when they

held jobs considered sensitive or prestigious. But again, party membership meant lengthy meetings, and lots of extra work in general. Women could say they just didn't have time.

"If it weren't for normalization (the hard-line Communist crackdown after 1968), I probably wouldn't have had my two daughters," one woman said.

Statistics show that few women held leadership posts in the Communist party, Šiklová says. Women made up nearly half the work force yet held only 18 percent of the "nomenclature" party posts. (She suspects that the same holds true for secret police positions, but those statistics were not available, she says with a laugh.)

In my last newsletter, I said women here in general were not subjected to the discrimination and sexism American women face. That is not to say there was no discrimination in Czechoslovakia. But under the Communist regime, men and women viewed their plight as "us against them" -- men and women fighting against the system. They were in it together. Women tell me they tended to feel sorry for the men, who usually were in the front lines in dealing with the Communists. They reject waging some kind of battle against those men now, as they imagine Western feminism wants them to.

Researchers say most women in the late 1980s did not think in terms of career but economic necessity when it came to working. They cared even less about applying their skills than making money. If they did change jobs, 55 percent did so because of low earnings; 30 percent because of bad working conditions; and only 15 percent because of insufficient use of their abilities, according to Kroupová.

About a third of the working women in the 1980s did want to be in management, Kroupová says. They were hampered by not being to able to continue or finish their education while they were looking after their small children.

"Further, women are perceived to be unreliable workers because of their traditional responsibility of caring for children and older or disabled relatives."

Another factor affecting women's earning power under socialism was that men did most of the heavy manual labor, and the wage policy valued brawn more than brains. Jobs not requiring hard physical labor paid less, but women flocked to them. They usually offered flexible hours, which made taking care of a family easier. And often, because of various quota systems regarding access to fields of study and professions, they were the only jobs available to women. As a result, many jobs became "feminized," which meant most of the employees were women, and

the jobs had low prestige.

"The most unfavorable consequence of feminization is the social devaluation of these jobs, affecting not only the earning level but the standards of qualification as well," according to Kroupová.

"In the service sector the process of feminization was most advanced. All the occupational groups -- clerical, sales and services workers -- had female participation rates of at least 60 percent, some -- especially clerical -- more than 80 percent. Occupations such as accountants, clerks, finance and insurance, and social welfare and public administration were almost exclusively the domain of women."*

Kroupová also says traditionally female-dominated industries "suffered throughout the past 40 years from a lack of subsidies which would have facilitated the promotion of new technologies corresponding with the needs of female workers."

SECTORS/OCCUPATIONS WITH HIGH FEMALE EMPLOYMENT SHARE (percent)*

1987

SOCIAL WELFARE	90.1
HEALTH SERVICES	85.9
BANKING AND INSURANCE	75.2
RETAIL, PUBLIC CATERING	76.2
EDUCATION AND CULTURE	74.9

INDUSTRIES IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA WITH A TRADITIONALLY HIGH SHARE OF FEMALE WORKERS*

	1970 %	1980 %	1990** %
CLOTHING	82.4	85.7	89.3
TEXTILE	71.7	71.3	74.4
LEATHER	64.9	65.2	67.5
FOOD	51.6	51.9	52.4

**Preliminary results of the 1990 census.

SHARE OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN "SOCIAL GROUPS," 1987 (percent)*

AGRICULTURAL WORKERS	44.3
OTHER MANUAL WORKERS	35.5
WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS	57.6
MEMBERS OF FARM COOPS	45.9
OTHER	58.1

"Feminization" is considered a serious problem today. People lament the fact that there are few male teachers, for example. They are worried that children suffer from an undue influence of women, and that they lack male role models.

I'm not comfortable with this point of view and think it borders on paranoia. I do accept as a problem the fact that many teachers thought of teaching as just another job, choosing it because it offered two-month vacations and a predetermined teaching plan that didn't require much effort. That's not a gender issue. It's part of the general problem of an ailing education system. But many people, including education ministry officials, seem to vent their anger by blaming women.

As you can see in the chart above, significant numbers of women do have physically strenuous jobs. The socialist stereotype of

sturdy Slavic women operating heavy machinery faded in Czechoslovakia over the years, and the extent of work forbidden to them and their legal protection grew. But despite this, some women still work in hazardous conditions, usually to make extra money. And even though there are limits on how much they are allowed to lift, Kroupová says exceptions are made in stores, post offices, hospitals -- places that employ mostly women.

In the "feminized," low-paid field of medicine, most doctors have salaries no higher than those of shop clerks. (This of course doesn't take bribes into account -- the envelopes of money patients are expected to slip them to ensure good care. Doctors also boost their income with overtime.) Šiklová says 84 percent of the personnel in pediatrics are women, but only 10 percent of them hold management posts such as those of head physician.

One thing no one seems to want to discuss -- never mind tamper with -- is maternity leave. I think it will be increasingly important in determining what kind of role Czechoslovak women will have in the labor market. In fact, it already is playing a big role in defining -- and limiting -- women's roles in Czechoslovakia's new economic system.

Czechoslovakia has a parental leave policy American women can only dream of. For 28 weeks, a woman gets 90 percent of her pay and keeps her exact job. After that, she can stay home until the child is 3 years old. There is a minimal government stipend during this period. The woman's employer must save for her a job "corresponding to her qualifications."

Both state and private employers are obligated to honor this policy. Some private employers have avoided having to provide benefits by treating workers like private contractors, but this legal loophole is sure to be closed because the state is losing large amounts of tax revenue.

Under socialism, people's productivity was so crippled and work places so overstaffed that vacancies caused by maternity leaves didn't matter too much. But that won't be the case with a private employer who wants to make money and hire as few people as possible. It's hard to imagine that a small business would want to hold a job open for months or even years.

Kroupová thinks maternity leaves ultimately will have to be shortened. When that legislative debate does come, it is sure to be highly politically charged. This is one remnant of socialism people seem to want to keep, which will not be lost on politicians who oppose market-oriented reforms. They will talk about family and social security and the cruelty of textbook capitalism. This is a tough issue, to which any new mother in the United States can attest.

"The current laws mean absolute inability to compete with men in the work place," says Stanislava Horská, a lawyer with the federal Labor Ministry who specializes in women's concerns. "Employers will think long and hard before hiring a woman."

But many employers here don't even pretend to be equal-opportunity employers.

A typical newspaper ad, this one for a major Prague bank, seeks

"YOUNG MEN (20-25 YEARS OLD) for customer service positions in the currency exchange department.

"We expect the ability to deal well with people, willingness to further your education and accept a heavy workload. A high degree of responsibility, a sense for precise and thorough work and at least school-level knowledge of English are basic requirements.

"We offer employment with advancement potential in a modern work setting and good financial terms."

This happens to be the currency exchange desk at the bank where I do business. I clipped the ad and the next time I was there I asked to see the personnel manager. She turned out to be a pleasant woman named Milada Chumová. She said the request for young men came from her boss. His reasoning is that young women tend to go on maternity leave, and the bank needs the department fully staffed. Also, Chumová added, women tend to get sick more.

Putting the gender issue aside for a minute, I suggested the age limit might discourage worthy applicants. She said people ignore it anyway, adding that people in their 50s will apply for that exchange desk job.

Now, back to why they don't want women: Men tend to be "more resilient" toward customers in this stressful job. You know, women tend to cry under pressure. I didn't know, but I pressed on: What if a woman doesn't want children, and she really wants to be a supervisor in your bank? No problem, says Chumová. If a young woman really wants to get ahead, "no one stands in her way." Except if they don't hire her in the first place.

Chumová also said a man isn't as "burdened by his family." If a child got sick, the mother would have to take care of the situation, stay home, and so on, she said.

As I was verbally picking apart the bank's display ad, another woman sat at the desk across from us and listened. She finally couldn't stand it anymore and announced that she was the author of the ad and that it seemed I was saying she did something improper. Well, her boss the personnel manager said, you did. Chumová said she had told her staff and her supervisor that there



Standing in line at the savings bank. Services are improving, but lines still are a way of life.

is a law as well as a union policy prohibiting any discrimination in hiring. (We then took a look at the federal labor law. It prohibits discrimination based on race, color, sex, social origin, age, political views, and several other categories).

So, I said, you're running an ad that violates the law and your union agreement. Yes they are, and no, nothing will happen to them, Chumová said. Before I left, the ad's author defended herself by noting, correctly, that lots of Western companies are running similar advertisements.

I don't know who they finally hired for the exchange desk. When I go in, there usually is at least one woman working. Apparently not everyone is on maternity leave.

Of course, some women are staying home now if their husband is making enough money. They're enjoying being the wives of successful capitalists, spending their days shopping and lunching. Others say they would love to follow suit if they could



Three generations take a break from the daily shopping. Many young mothers have the advantage of built-in baby sitters -- grandparents who live in the same city or even the same house. The grandparents' help allows the mothers to go back to work, or just lightens their load.

afford it. This is an understandable reaction to decades of living and working in a society with few conveniences.

"It's something like when a person hasn't had a vacation for a long time," Šiklová says. But, she adds, "If the vacation was to last two months, they'd be sick of it." She predicts most women eventually will want to return to work. But will they be able to come back from vacation? The job market is becoming more competitive. Unemployment is real now: Women are losing jobs more often than men (women made up 52 percent of the unemployed in June 1991, for example), staying jobless longer than men, and collecting lower unemployment benefits.

"Women are the ones who are going to bear the burden," Czechoslovak women tell me when we discuss the transformation to

a market economy. They say they're working just as hard, or harder than before. What about their husbands? Why not ask them to help more? It's difficult to get women to talk about that. Probably even to think about it. It's hard to say right now what will eventually bring about change.

A final aside of sorts: I used to smile when in recent months I started hearing people here complain about the same things we complain about in the United States. Bad movies. Obnoxious commercials. Slick politicians. Now it's beginning to be a bit eerie, and a bit sad.

There is an ongoing debate here about "how much" capitalism. Some people embrace the American model, or even a purer form. But others don't want to emulate America -- not its mistakes, anyway. Like them, I feel a twinge of sadness when they say they have no time to read anymore, and that the only time they see their spouses is when they pass in the hall, one coming in and the other going out.

I wonder whether they will start using terms like "quality time," "rat race" and "burnout." I read that therapists already are reporting a surge of complaints about the new phenomenon of workaholic spouses. Spouses, usually wives, who at first were happy when their partners finally could do what they wanted, start a business, realize themselves, as they like to say, now say they never see them anymore.

They shouldn't look to America for the solution to that one.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Dagmar'.

Dagmar

*Statistics are from "The Promotion of Equality for Women in Central and Eastern Europe," a report by Alena Kroupová, August 1991.

Received in Hanover 5/18/92