

Reconciling the professional and home lives of men and women in the countries of the East.

The case of Bulgaria

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Introduction

All the countries of Eastern Europe shared the same concept of the emancipation of women, founded first and foremost on carrying on a profession and access to all jobs in a period when unemployment was unknown. In these countries, especially those furthest to the south, two pays, two models of the sexual division of labour co-existed. In the professional world, the couple consisted of two assets, whereas when it came to the home life, the "Mediterranean model" predominated, with domestic work falling solely, or virtually solely, to women. In Bulgaria, the massive presence of women in the workforce had gradually become normal and accepted social reality.

During the communist era, there was full employment and the "proclaimed" emancipation of women. Almost all women worked full time, on open-ended contracts and benefited from the social security. Official rhetoric proclaimed women's wish to be "emancipated", whereby economic power was supposedly the basis of equality of the sexes and the tools which allowed women to exercise their basic rights. Specifically, this translated into proclaimed egalitarianism in the workplace and socially (encouragement to take part in public life)¹.

There was considerable legislation, supposedly to enable them to "reconcile" their roles as mothers-wives-workers: long-term leave to bring up their children (up to age 3) with their job guaranteed; crèches, nurseries, pre-school facilities, child-care facilities for out-of-school hours. Whilst considerable legislation existed supposedly to enable women to "combine" their role as mother-wife with that of workers, the stereotype of the mother-wife was never questioned. All, or almost all, of them took on simultaneously virtually

¹ Kergoat D., Vladimirova K., 2004, Equality of the sexes and employment policies in Bulgaria, in *Transitions*, vol. XLIV.1, European Institute, University of Geneva, ULB, ED. J.Heinen and St.Portet, Brussels, p. p. 90-91

all the domestic work, and particularly heavy domestic work. Male/female equality was specified as a political objective but not treated as a political matter.

In Eastern Europe with the onset of the transitional reforms towards the market economy, the employment rate of women has quickly fallen. And even in certain countries it is still falling in the case of young women and those over 50. Significant differences are appearing between men and women and between women themselves; in the case of each country and between countries.

During the second half of the 1990s, with the start of integration into the European Union, a new rhetoric developed, based on “equality of opportunity”, parallel to the stated wish to facilitate “reconciliation” of professional and family life.

Men and women in professional life

The rapid and far-reaching restructuring of the economy of the early 90s has changed the professional structures and the spread of jobs depending on the sex of the various professions. The reduction by almost half of the industrial workforce and the sudden growth in the workforce in the tertiary sector have interrupted the careers of many men and an even higher number of women. Most engineers, technicians and agricultural specialists lost their jobs and have never found any new ones. The main consequences of the transition towards a market economy are unemployment, lack of job security and low salaries; women and young people of both sexes are the most affected. There is a strong feminisation of poverty and inequality in the workplace.

The biggest differences remain between men and women at age 25 to 34 and after age 55. For this age group the inequality is linked to the discrimination which exists in the law (different ages at which men and women can retire) and in the practice or policy of companies with regard to young women of an age to marry and have children.

Part-time work remains little developed in East European countries. Across genres, employment and unemployment appear to be unequally divided between men and women.

In recent years, we have seen inequality between women themselves, because of their family status and their income. Employers often refuse to take on young girls or

young women, criticising them for their lack of years' service, lack of professional experience and, above all, the fact that they might have children. Childbearing and family responsibilities make them inferior on the job market. Studies show that fixed-term contracts, temping or working on the "black market" and unusual hours affect mostly women. For them, as for young people, job offers are on the decrease and fixed-term contracts often replace those of indefinite duration.

Traditional employment is on the wane and this reduction affects both men and women. At the same time, instances of work being interrupted because of redundancy, training or change of profession/job, taking on parental or family responsibilities etc., are on the up. All that changes the professional life model of both men and women. For men, these changes prevent them to some extent from playing their traditional role as the principal breadwinner in the household. The number of cases where the man earns less than the wife and/or does not work for various reasons, is increasing. Changes in employment are leading to changes in the position (role) of the man in society.

Home life : what equality for the two sexes?

Paid work only occupies part of life. In order to understand the situation in the world of work of each sex, we also have to take into account the so-called informal economy and domestic work in order to specify the respective shares of men and women in the creation and split of wealth and thus to measure social and democratic power.

We should first underline the particular situation of Bulgaria as regards domestic work. Whilst for a long time Bulgarian women had the highest rate of employment in Europe, they are also the champions when it comes to time spent on domestic work. And the traditional vision persists whereby household tasks, caring for and educating children, domestic production, etc. are an obligation for a woman, and a woman only, including when she works and when her husband is unemployed or retired; in the best scenario, men "help".

Inequality in how tasks are divided up is increasing. Bulgarian women currently do 8 hours more domestic work per week than men, yet the length of the working week is substantially the same for both sexes (41.7 hours in the case of men, compared to 40.6

hours for women) and the inequality is increasing as time goes by². Yet it is undeniably the involvement in the family economy and domestic production and the time spent on them, which is the most determining factor in the growth of domestic work. Whilst this commitment is traditional in Bulgaria, the economic crisis has made it vital for many households and has forced numerous women in large towns to go and join the women from the villages and small towns in these activities.

For women, roles are "reconciled" under increasingly difficult circumstances. The new corporate discipline no longer allows women to take liberties with their working hours and to carry out certain domestic duties during working hours, a practice which was implicitly tolerated and relatively common during the socialist era. Childcare has become a veritable nightmare: the rarefaction of infrastructures intended for young children, the privatisation of establishments and the off-putting cost of their services, together with mass unemployment and poverty, have reduced not only supply but also demand. Not only do women do virtually all domestic work, but the latter has increased considerably with greater involvement in family production and it is being "shared" with men less and less.

Women complain of the stress which they are under: how to keep their job, how to find one, how to acquire or maintain an adequate level of qualification, how to hold on to or seek employment whilst carrying out family duties at the same time, how to do their domestic work "properly" when the intensity of the work is increasing, when pauses and absences are reduced to a minimum, when daily and weekly work is often very long? A strong sense of guilt, of "never getting to the end" increases as the years go on; the institution of the family is starting to be questioned very seriously: changes in opinion are, in fact, very important. This re-evaluation of the traditional values of marriage and of the family is also even more clear given that the women questioned are well educated and have a good level of training. They want to both provide a living for themselves and look after their families, children and husbands. The best educated, and therefore those with access to the job market on good conditions, are re-evaluating the traditional values of marriage and the family because they want to have successful careers. Rare are those who reach a prestigious level and good salary, and when they do get there it is by sacrificing

² *Women, work, globalisation*, 2003, UNIFEM, ASA, JAR, Sofia

their desire to have a family. Men, on the other hand, remain more traditionalist, more attached to the old values, no doubt because it is in their interests. One can hypothesise here that the gap is widening between the image of the man as the provider, the "head of the family", and his real role which, under the pressure of the economic conditions, is increasingly shared with or transferred to women. The latter feel doubly responsible, having to look after children, husband and family all at the same time.

The key factor in the debate about women's work comes down to a single question: how can we help them to "reconcile" work with their domestic duties?³

It must be stressed that there are differences between generations. For the young, the differences between the two sexes are reducing (somewhat slowly) as regards the division of time between paid work and unpaid work (work in the family or housework). There are changes in attitude amongst young groups – towards marriage, but also towards the division of labour. Amongst young men, we can see an increasing involvement in household/family tasks, whereas amongst young women the trend is the other way. It could be that, to a certain extent, these processes are also linked to a new model of family life – without official marriage (a practice which has developed very quickly over the last 15 years in Bulgaria). However, men's involvement in household or family tasks remains relatively small⁴.

At the same time, for some households we see that the time spent on domestic or family tasks is reducing. In some households we see a relatively high involvement by men in the duties of the household or family. These are men from the youngest groups who work on fixed-term contracts and are highly qualified for a specific profession. These men spend less time on their paid employment and have lower income than their wives, who normally have a higher educational level. The data indicates that the highly qualified women spend less time on household or family tasks and are responsible for the overall reduction in the time spent (by both sexes) on work within the family. This is what has given rise to the phenomenon where involvement of the husband in family or

³ D. Kergoat, Vladimirova K., 2004, Equality of the sexes and employment policies in Bulgaria, in *Transitions*, vol. XLIV.1, European Institute, University of Geneva, ULB, ED. J.Heinen et St.Portet, Brussels, p.

⁴ M. Atanassova, 2005, Changes in employment and their influence on policies of equality between the sexes, In "Working hours and working conditions", Under the dir. of Katia Vladimirova, Ed. 'Stopanstvo', Sofia, p. 255-266

domestic work is increasing, not because he is doing more, but because the number of hours spent on work of this kind is falling. Analysis of the data leads to the conclusion that women (especially young women) are more flexible in the new job market conditions and manage to reduce the time spent on household and family tasks in favour of paid employment. The important factors are the higher level of education and the existence of flexible forms of working for men (more specifically work on a fixed-term contract). This trend demonstrates that there are changes in the traditional division of roles within the family/household which should be taken into account by sexual equality policies and practices both at macro level and within organisations.

Possible explanations for this could be the hierarchy of values between the public and home spheres, the development of the economy, social changes. Differences between countries reveal what in the west in recent years have been called “gender conventions” or ways of managing the professional and family spheres.

Legislation : equality and positive discrimination

The Constitution, the Employment Code and the anti-discrimination Law (passed in 2003) contain a large number of provisions guaranteeing the right to work, freedom to work and also worker protection. Numerous texts prohibit discrimination of any kind at work, be it direct or indirect, whether based on nationality, origin, “race”, skin colour, **sex**, age, religious beliefs, political opinions, membership of a union, **family**, social or material **situation**, or disability.

According to the *Constitution* of the Republic of Bulgaria, couples have equal obligations and rights in the marriage (art. 46) and children born outside of marriage have the same rights as children born within marriage (art. 47 al. 3) .

The *Employment Code* (EC) strictly prohibits direct or indirect discrimination based on nationality, origin, sex, race, skin colour, age, political or religious beliefs, membership of trade unions, **civil**, social or material **situation** and disablement, when citizens exercise their employment rights and duties (art. 8 para. 3).

In Bulgaria, according to current legislation, no workers or employees are excluded from application of the principle of equal treatment. The Employment Code (EC) sets out special protection for the jobs of certain categories of workers and employees who are in a particular physiological, health or social condition, in order to

ensure equality in practice in the work process. These are: minors, women and people with reduced ability to work

Women enjoy all the rights specified for all workers and employees. At the same time, they enjoy additional rights and increased requirements in terms of working conditions, in order to take account of the particular anatomical and physiological characteristics of the female body and the woman's position as a mother, wife and housewife.

Bulgarian legislation imposes certain demands as regards the appointment to certain posts and the carrying out of certain professions which are not considered to be discrimination (as defined in Convention No 111 of the OMT). In these cases, too, no differences, exclusions or preferences are permitted based on race, colour, religion or national origin. Women are prohibited from carrying out certain types of work (art. 307 of the EC). The prohibition covers tasks which are difficult or harmful to the health or maternal functions of women. This list is defined by a decision of the Council of Ministers (Decree). In this case, the prohibition must be seen as a means to protect the life and health of women, and not as an exclusion (in the discrimination sense) based on sex. This concept has been adopted and ratified in Bulgaria, and in the practice of the OMT (Convention No 45 regarding underground work for women of 1935).

The system of leave for pregnancy, maternity and educating children is defined in the Employment Code. Maternity leave, however, is only available for workers and employees who have a legal working relationships (an employment contract). The rights of the mother (leave for educating children) can be used by the father if the mother is not able to benefit from them. Parental leave has only recently been adopted in the country. Very few men take advantage of this leave.

The repeated rejection of a law on the equality of men and women must give rise to questions. The several drafts of this law were drawn up as long ago as 2001 and up to now by the Minister for employment and social policy, with representatives from civil society (women's ONG) and the social partners. The debate, carried on mainly by the ONGs, is continuing in the country as to the need for a specific law on male-female equality and to better sort out the policy regarding the balance between the professional and home lives of both men and women and also because sexual discrimination affects the whole population and overlaps with all other specific forms of discrimination. We believe that it is highly unlikely to be passed unless required to be so by the EU.

Policies for equality or the policy to reconcile the professional and family lives of men and women

In the countries of the South, the problems and policies of equality or the policy to reconcile professional and family life, are less well known. For various reasons, in these countries the policies and practices regarding gender equality are not as widespread and developed, either overall or within companies. As things stand at the moment, the policies and practices implemented for gender equality do not take into account the various attitudes of men to work.

In Bulgaria the policy in this domain exists at macro level and in the national plan for employment.

Within the company it is still considered that only women have problems with work because of their family commitments, whereas men are identified according to their professional activities. Companies do not ask the question and the requirement for giving men the opportunity of looking after their children and doing household tasks. They do not have any sexual equality policy.

Organisations which tolerate those who do additional hours put up an invisible wall (“the glass ceiling”) against those who want to make a career by combining their work and family obligations and these are above all women.

Within organisations the dominant culture is still that the man is considered in his traditional role - the main source of revenue in the family, who can work non-stop day and night, seven days a week, all year round.

These peculiarities of the dominant organisational culture have a certain influence on the sexual equality policies and practices of companies which do not affect men and their needs to balance work and family life. Studies show that the gender equality policies and practices applied reflect the traditional role of the man in the family and at work, without taking account of the changes which have occurred in employment in recent years.

In the country there are very few men who look after a family member and they do not form a homogenous group. The degree of aptitude towards such activities is different, as is their approach to the situation – voluntary or forced, depending on the situation. Some of these men have planned in advance to look after a member of the

family and consider that this forms part of their value system and attitudes. Other men say that they never intended to look after a member of the family, but circumstances have forced them to do so.

Conclusion

As stated in the EC, i.e. in terms of equality of opportunity and reconciliation of professional life and family life, the alignment of European policies is not a complicated legislative exercise. But moreover, it masks a certain continuity, at least at the formal and discursive level, with the previous regime: it is our hypothesis that under the discursive exterior of change, the old characteristics have, in fact, been retained in terms of public policy: paternalism, assistantship, not questioning the home/public relationship, etc.

Directives on employment mechanically transfer the European strategies. But these themselves have come from countries which have different traditions, different cultures, different "gender conventions". Real equality requires a complex approach.

It is also necessary to re-examine and redefine the place of man as an element in sexual equality policy, both overall and within companies. We must also stress that there are questions which are associated with different generations. Young people are more open to taking part in domestic work, they are also more open to a policy reconciling professional and home life for men and women.

At the same time, however, we can see a few signs which suggest that whilst overall the state of social relationships based on gender is not questioned, that of the specific sexual division is starting to be on several specific points. There are a lot of debates and proposals, there are already policies in the national plans for employment and equality and for the reconciliation of professional and family life, but in fact virtually everything is for women. In fact there are very few debates and policies about men. In other words, they are for making comparisons with the situation of women. Rarely are the problems of men raised, their point of view, their situation in the family. One of the explanations is that men are usually absent or around very little during this debate. Among other explanations is that cases of sexual discrimination against men or single fathers are fairly rare in the country.

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