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Women's Vital Voices: The Costs of Exclusion in
Eastern Europe

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Women's Vital Voices

The Costs of Exclusion in Eastern Europe

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The advent of democracy in the former communist states of Europe brings both much promise and, as we are learning, much peril.¹ For millions, the complexion of life has evolved from red to rose-colored to raw. A monolithic nemesis has been replaced by a perplexing variety of threats to stability in this fragile region, with expressions of democracy frequently drowned out by the noises of intolerance and repression.

In this brave new world, the voices of women are vital to healthy social and political discourse. The dramatically low status of women in post-communist Europe is an issue that goes beyond the well-being of women per se to the fostering of economic development and democracy. American interests require that we help the region's women carve out their rightful place in the mainstream of society.

ON THE MARGINS OF DEMOCRACY

Life under communism was a far cry from the auspicious pronouncements of fair treatment for all comrades. After all, equal access to parliamentary charades, empty shelves, and substandard health

services was hardly a boon. With the fall of communism, the trappings of gender parity fell away, exposing discrimination against women that had persisted in the totalitarian state. The transition to capitalism has been difficult for most, but especially for women.

While the particulars of women's status differ from country to country, patterns of marginalization exist: diminished labor market access, increasing vulnerability to crime, loss of family-oriented social benefits, and exceedingly low parliamentary representation. In many countries in transition the feminization of poverty has been striking. In Russia, 87 percent of employed urban residents with incomes under \$21 a month are female; above earnings of \$315 a month, the figure nose-dives to 32 percent. To an even greater extent than in the West, Eastern European women tend to be clustered in the low-paying professions. But during this period of transition, ever-more-blatant gender-biased hiring and promotion practices are becoming deeply entrenched; job advertisements frequently specify "attractive female receptionist" or

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“male manager.” In most of the new democracies, regulations prescribe early retirement for women, locking them into fixed incomes far removed from the free market.

Under the weight of gender-based layoffs, lower pay, and meager career opportunities, this downward spiral is accelerating. In Russia, women's wages slipped from 70 percent of men's in 1989 to 40 percent in 1995, and in most sectors women are the last hired and first fired. In Slovakia, between 1989 and 1993 women earned just over half what men did—although more women were university graduates. In Belarus, where the majority of specialists are female, women search for a job three times longer than their male counterparts.

The slower the economic growth, the more severe is women's disadvantage. Employment gaps between women and men are least apparent in Poland and the Czech Republic, which are thriving. In countries experiencing more difficult transitions, the gap is larger. In Ukraine, for example, women constitute 70 percent of the unemployed, and the trend is sharply worsening. The underlying rationale was distilled by Russian Labor Minister Gennady Melikyan in 1993: “Why should we employ women when men are out of work?”

With divorce rates on the rise, the failure to force fathers to pay child support also contributes to the impoverishment of women. Likewise, holes in the government social net of kindergartens, child care, health care, and pensions make life precarious for women, who are usually

expected to shoulder 100 percent of family responsibilities. In a reversal of communist demands that women work alongside men in fields and factories, whether they want to or not, women are now being pushed back to hearth and home.

Complicating their situation even further, women in Eastern Europe are disproportionately vulnerable to rising crime. Trafficking in women, which is increasing exponentially, ravages the bodies and spirits of impoverished young women promised jobs in the West only to find themselves controlled by pimps. A distressingly unexceptional case is that of a Polish shipyard clerk recruited for a better-paying job as a waitress in Germany. The recruiter photographed her being raped, then threatened to send the pictures to her devout mother in Gdansk. There has been a tragic surge in such violations since the rending of the Iron Curtain. By 1993 there were an estimated 8,000 Polish prostitutes in Frankfurt alone.

The development of legal protections often taken for granted in the West has languished in many of these countries. In Hungary, there is no law against sexual harassment in the workplace, which a U.N. report describes as “virtually epidemic.” In some villages in Serbia-Montenegro, brides are still bought and sold. In Bulgaria, the law demands a witness in order to prosecute a rape case, and no prosecution for spousal abuse is possible unless the wife has been killed or permanently injured. Women in Moldova report that their courts view domestic violence as a “private family issue,” yet in neighboring

¹For this discussion, Eastern Europe is defined as stretching east to Moscow and from the Baltics to Albania.

Russia, where an estimated 80 percent of violent crimes take place in the home, 15,000 women are killed by their husbands each year.

Clearly women were not integral to policymaking before the transition to democracy. But as a new chapter of freedom is being written, they ironically find themselves confined to the margins. Although communist parliaments were little more than rubber stamps, women were at least visible, their presence ensured by state-imposed quotas. To some extent, that ruse was itself pernicious. Nevertheless, the pretense of representation has been replaced by today's transparent exclusion. Across the chasm of political upheaval, from 1987 to 1994 the percentage of women in parliament decreased from 28 percent to 6 percent in Albania, from 34 percent to 4 percent in Romania, and from 21 percent to 11 percent in Hungary. Parliament was 33 percent female in the Soviet Union, but in many of the newly independent states the figure is now under 3 percent. The same downward trend is apparent for women in top ministerial posts: representation in Albania, Romania, and Hungary declined from 6 percent, 12 percent, and 4 percent, respectively, to zero.

AT HALF STRENGTH

Forty-five years ago, U.N. Ambassador Eleanor Roosevelt pointed out to the General Assembly that "too often the great decisions are originated and given form in bodies . . . so completely dominated by [men] that whatever of special

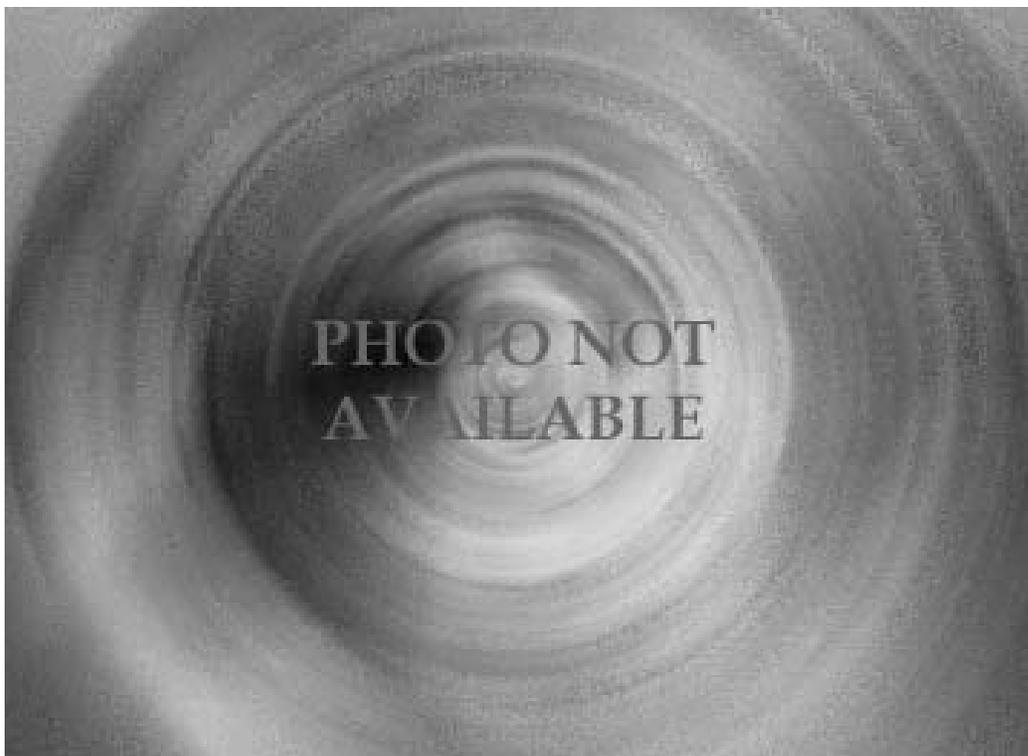
value women have to offer is shunted aside without expression."

What women have to offer is nothing less than essential elements of the infrastructure of political stability.² Economic disparity, social hardships, breakdown of the rule of law, and weakness in civil structures are all exacerbated by the exclusion of women from the core of society. For example, women in poverty raise children in poverty, children less likely to benefit from good health, good education, and good jobs—children whose own unstable lives in turn contribute to the instability of their communities.

New free-market economies are producing a wide gap between rich and poor citizens, creating class resentments. When women, who generally build small to midlevel companies, are not valued as a resource for filling out the middle class, they cannot fuel their countries' economies as reliable employees and innovative entrepreneurs. Eastern Europe urgently needs the same energy that has driven the U.S. economy: a quarter of the American labor force is now employed by women-owned businesses, which, in 25 years, have increased from 5 percent to 35 percent of all U.S. firms.

Looking outward, the continuing disparity between rich and poor European countries, exacerbated by the disregard of talented and highly educated women in post-communist democracies, also undermines regional stability. Just when their contribution is most needed to strengthen fragile economies, women are stumbling on their way to the mar-

²To describe the role or qualities of women, one must resort to generalities that do serious injustice to the differences among individuals. That said, one should not back away from thinking in gender terms, even though those categories can be misunderstood or misused.



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Living on the margins: Refugees in Gorazde, 1997

ketplace, overburdened with household responsibilities. Women report that, more than ever, they are preoccupied with just getting through the day rather than building the future.

The discounting of women actually contributes to lawlessness, and the reverse is also true: trafficking in women is fueling organized crime, creating a menacing new East-West link as traffickers enjoy an endless market, enormous profits, minimal punishment, and little risk of getting caught. Fledgling democracies are especially vulnerable to and destabilized by such lawlessness. Nor is this violence against women solely an issue of justice; societies cannot honestly support women as builders of the new economies while tolerating a market in which criminals sell them as commodities.

Although there are still serious gender inequities in Western Europe as well, the trend there is toward women's full involvement, based on the democratic principle that lack of representation in political chambers is a fundamental flaw. The widening variance in the evolution of women's roles creates a further divide between Eastern and Western Europe at a time when stability through integration is a continental goal.

Finally, extensive sociological studies, neurological research, linguistic analysis, and political polling support the premise that, whether due to nature or nurture, there are differences in the way women and men perceive and behave. Women have coalesced in new alliances—there were 40 women's groups across Bosnia in the middle of the war—and they have led

in the development of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the building blocks of any civil society. Eighty-four percent of NGOs in the Czech Republic, for example, are now headed by women. Sometimes women's cooperation has significant political import. In a dramatic crucible, after Bosnian Serb forces seizing Srebrenica in July 1995 massacred thousands of Muslim boys and men, Bosnian Muslim women were asked if they could work with Bosnian Serb women also searching for missing loved ones. The women nodded, then added, "We are all mothers."

PROFITABLE INVESTMENTS

When President Clinton sent Vice President Al Gore to lead the U.S. delegation to the 1994 U.N. population conference in Cairo, he set a new direction for U.S. policy in support of the priorities of women. That theme was reinforced through high-level U.S. leadership both at the 1995 U.N. women's conference in Beijing and afterward, when the White House formed an interagency council, now chaired by the secretary of state, to track implementation of the commitments the United States had made.

With the eyes of the world on the United States, the active global presence of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is probably the most potent contribution to the empowerment of women worldwide. But we are also taking more concrete steps.

For example, understanding that investing in women provides both short-term and long-term gains, the United States is sharpening its focus on women's economic enterprises. The U.S. government can ensure that entrepreneurial education is

directed to women, as with recent funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for management training for 5,000 women dairy farmers in Albania and women running former state farms in Russia.

Credit is also critical. With a 98 percent rate of repayment, microloans for women are an extremely efficient way to support women and restore damaged economies. One example is the Bosnian Women's Initiative, launched by President Clinton at the 1996 Group of Seven summit. Bolstering business ventures by women of all three Bosnian ethnic groups, the grant program increases the economic—and therefore social and political—role of women. The First Lady has become a strong advocate for microcredit, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recently sponsored a conference to explore the connection between growth-oriented economies and women-owned businesses.

In terms of crime, an increased American presence in global law enforcement must support the new foreign policy emphasis on women's full participation in society. The U.S. government is focusing on this European slave trade. As part of the effort to combat trafficking in women, the United States was an active observer at a 1996 meeting in Austria whose aim was to harmonize national and international policies and legislation.

Similarly, as we back such democratic institutions as free media, independent judiciaries, open markets, NGOs, and multiparty elections, our support can help advance women as journalists, judges, investors, entrepreneurs, activists, and elected officials. To that end, a July conference in Vienna under the auspices of

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the U.S.-EU New Transatlantic Agenda, "Vital Voices: Women in Democracy," will bring together 150 women leaders from post-communist states to develop strategies with 150 women from the West.

Finally, USAID has supported numerous NGOs developing women's leadership in Croatia, Poland, Russia, Albania, and Bosnia. As a corollary, local women leaders must be included in U.S. government events in Eastern Europe where issues are discussed, deals are made, and policies refined. That may mean more creativity in compiling American embassies' Rolodexes, drawing from new sectors where women are key players, such as NGOs, the free media, and independent judiciaries. Similarly, embassies can expand programs to energize promising female political leaders by selecting them for visitors programs to the United States. From decades of experience identifying talented young male leaders, we can project that our early encouragement will reap enormous long-term gains.

While each of these efforts is infinitesimally small compared to the overall activities of the U.S. government, they all represent progressive steps for the foreign policy community. To use Secretary Albright's formulation, "focusing on women is not simply the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do."

RAISING THEIR VOICES

Even in the face of hardship, women in the developing democracies are not playing the role of silent victims. Many have not only survived the transition, but are central to the formation of a civil society.

Over the past century, the nonprofit movement was a training ground for women in the United States; likewise,

today's NGOs are providing an opportunity for development of European women leaders. Founded in 1990, the Network of East-West Women links more than 1,500 advocates in over 30 countries. Such projects not only provide important analysis (the Center for Gender Studies in Moscow is a regional leader), but also work directly with women in need. For example, La Strada was formed by women in Poland to offer shelter and information, warning other women of the dangers of the trafficking trade. And in spite of Moldova's economic plight, its Women's Association has 27 chapters that provide charitable assistance as well as technical support to women starting their own businesses.

The disorienting transition has not kept outstanding women leaders from appearing as government ministers and heads of key national and municipal entities. Their numbers are few as they break through a thick glass ceiling impenetrable in the days of totalitarian rule. But once broken, that barrier can never be resealed.

Examples abound of women finding their voices in post-communist Europe, and what they're calling for is nothing less than a just and humane society. Those basic American values are the rich resonance fundamental to a free-market economy and stable democracy. As women echo our own values, it is in the United States' interest to magnify their voices. 🌐