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Women's Political Citizenship in Post State-socialist Countries

Abstract

The state controlled society in the Eastern Europe had little space for citizenship initiatives for decades. Repeated cases of 'forced volunteerism' by youth and women were mainly initiated and closely supervised by state officials. After the political changes in the early 90's in Central and Eastern Europe, many scholars predicted that the end of communism would lead to a greater degree of citizen-led initiatives, including women's higher rate of engagement in political and civil society activities. Indeed, such citizenship actions and initiatives quickly emerged, but women's participation in different areas was not as high as expected. Civil society offered women more space to apply their political agency regarding several issues, whether directly or non-directly related to women's issues. If women were not equally represented in the civil society domain, their contributions were still missing, so they could bring about no change to the lives of their own or those of other citizens. As a matter of fact civil society offered women in Eastern Europe a space to exert their political agency: a domain where they could act between the state and individuals. However, women's exertion of political rights in this domain of citizenship is still controversial as long as there are presented some problematic implications related to men and their involvement in civil society as compared to women's agency and their political citizenship. First, even though civil society was initially considered by men as worthwhile and promising, they later became more interested in parliamentary politics where there was more decision-making power. As a result, this implied that women were replacing men after they left for something more influential than civil society. Second, if civil society activities are viewed as less important than parliamentary political involvement, women's agency within civil society is devalued, thus perpetuating women's role as being more humanitarian than political. Third, civil society through non-governmental organizations is mainly influenced by donors and their agenda, which may lessen women's agency and influence as political actors.

Keywords: political citizenship, post state socialism, civil society, Albania, women.

1-Introduction

The existence of one-party systems in Eastern European Post State Socialist countries, where almost everything was state controlled, barely encouraged any individuals or groups' chances of getting organized on the basis of their own initiatives as citizens. This reality is accurately expressed by Mai in the following terms: "Under communism the nations of Eastern Europe never had a 'civil' society, which exists when individuals or groups are free to associate and form organizations that are both independent from the state and able to mediate in different ways between citizens and the state (Mai 2002, 216). It is obvious that most of the Eastern European citizens did not live in countries where they could freely group themselves or get organized as civil agents mediating between themselves and the socialist state. Such realistic description of civil society in Eastern European countries can only be debatable if we count initiatives like pioneering, women's and youth groups as citizens' initiatives. However, it is also widely accepted that these initiatives that are also referred to as 'forced volunteerism' were mainly encouraged and implemented under close supervision by state officials, thus excluding chances of having freedom to associate or mediate.

2-Political citizenship and Women in Eastern Europe

Alongside the civil and social aspects of citizenship, political citizenship constitutes one of the three dimensions of citizenship. According to Marshall, the political aspect of citizenship is the "right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body" (Marshall 1950, 10). Political power under state socialism was primarily exerted by state recognized structures, thus allotting little space to individuals outside such bodies to exercise any political power or undertake any initiatives as active citizens.

The political occurrences in the early 90-s in Central and Eastern European countries were accompanied by major changes in individual,

societal and state levels. A number of scholars predicted that the collapse of communist rule in Eastern European countries would be followed by the emergence of citizenship action where citizens would be more viable and willing to get involved in issues concerning their lives. As Macedo has pointed out: "Under the old system, legitimacy flowed from the top: from a party claiming possession of political truth. Now legitimacy will flow up from the bottom, or at least, it will if citizens take advantage of participatory channels" (Macedo 2000, 59).

The same prediction was applicable to women's citizenship too, and feminist as well as non-feminist Western scholarship foresaw a boost in women's engagement in civil society, either through women's organizations or through individual initiatives as citizens. So, after the state-socialism collapse, women's political engagement was expected to be high and flourishing. As Einhorn has affirmed, "[t]he process of democratization in East Central Europe, coupled with the shift from a state-directed economy to the establishment of markets, has created new civil society spaces and given rise to new expectations of more active, participatory citizenship (Einhorn 2001, 105).

Yet, the change in political systems in Eastern European countries regarding gender relations was accompanied by a phenomenon that Peggy Watson defines as "the rise in masculinism" (Watson 1993, 72). In other words, women in post state-socialist countries experienced a withdrawal into the households while men's domination was manifested throughout different spheres like economy, labor market, and most importantly, politics (Matland and Montgomery 2003; Gal & Kligman 2000; Einhorn 1993). East European women's lack of access into the above-mentioned spheres, as Einhorn has pointed out, causes them a loss of political, social and economic citizenship rights (Einhorn 1993, 172).

At present, women's participation in politics in post-communist Eastern Europe is still limited and not as high as it should be. There are different explanations as well as hypothetical solutions to this problem. Along these lines, it is important to notice that the exclusion from political citizenship deprives women from exerting their agency as political actors. As

Heinen puts it: "Whether the absence of women from the political sphere results from practices of exclusion at their expense, from their being over-loaded with domestic tasks, or from skepticism of women themselves about the value of participating in politics does not change very much: the outcome is that they have fewer opportunities to participate in decisions concerning the whole community or their own interests (Heinein 1997, 581). Therefore, not being present at decision-making levels, women can-not have political influence upon issues that affect them as women and citizens, which also limits their possibility to contribute on the benefit of other citizens as well.

3-Women and Civil Society

In this respect, as foreseen by scholars, one way for Eastern Euro-pean women to exert their political agency was through civil society. As Gal and Kligman maintain, civil society should not be closely or only seen as institutions or organizations, but also as an "ideological foundation" that results in a new perception of boundaries between state organiza-tions and what is now called voluntary, independent or "non-governmen-tal organizations" (Gal and Kligman 2000: 94). As a matter of fact, post state-socialist countries have experienced a boost in non-governmental in-stitutions where women occupy a particular place with their organizations addressing both women and non-women-related issues. In these regards, women's exertion of political citizenship through civil society activities can be considered as women's success and achievement.

4-Problematizing Civil Society

However, there exist three problematic implications behind wom-en's activism through civil society in post state-socialist countries. First, women's participation as political citizens within civil society can be viewed as successful primarily because men are indirectly offering space to women through their lack of interest in it, as Gal and Kligman point out: "During the socialist period, when oppositional movements first articulat-

ed the importance of civil society and stressed the heroism of their own dissident actions, it was men who took the most visible roles…. But when parliamentary politics became a forum for asserting power and influence, civil society came to be seen as less attractive to men and relatively weak. In the years since 1989, civil society has increasingly become an arena of women's political action; national politics, the realm of men (Gal and Kligman 2000: 95).

In reaction to this implication, one would reasonably say that men are also involved in civil society and that women's activism is truly an achievement of women themselves without being indebted to men. However, even though women exert political action through their citizenship activities as part of civil society, they also need to participate in larger scales in national and international politics in order to be fully present and equal in political citizenship.

The second problematic implication regarding Eastern European women's agency within political citizenship lies in the fact that given the particular field of engagement in civil society, women's activities risk to be framed as a secondary way of political involvement, thus being devalued from its political potential. As Einhorn states, if women's engagement in civil society is considered as filling the vacuum gaps of services the state does not provide, then it "perpetuates the undervaluing of women's political involvement, demeaning it as 'mere' humanitarian activity conducted within the terms of the nurturing and caring roles often deemed 'natural' for women" (Einhorn 2000: 118). This implication needs serious consideration because it once more excludes men and their engagement in similar or same fields in civil society, whose mere presence challenges the application of the "natural" role argument.

Moreover, the above implication is also related to the influence that donors have on the activities undertaken by citizen actors within civil society, which comprises the third problematic issue of women's engagement in civil society activities. First, a prominent aspect of civil society needs to be pointed out: the problematic trend of civil society development in Central and Eastern Europe, which is best summarized by Ferenc Misslev-

itz, who states: 'what we dreamed of was civil society; what we got was NGOs' (1997, in Einhorn 2000: 117). Hence, the field of women's activities as actors in civil society through non-governmental organizations is greatly affected by and often dependent on donors' interests and fields of investment.

As one of the UNDP reports (United Nations Development Program) points out, the same problem of donors influencing women's actions within civil society is evidenced in Albania as well. So, as the report states, "the difficulties in fund-raising to cover fixed costs may turn civil society's movements into donor-oriented entities, which are not serving the real need of the country and of the most vulnerable groups" (UNDP, 1999, 8). Even though this quote does not specify what kind of activities women as civil society actors undertake, it clearly points out the donors' impact on the agenda of women's organizations.

5-Conclusion

Beyond the problematic implications of women's engagement in civil society as above listed, women's involvement in civil society in Eastern Europe is also affected by country specific factors that influence women's general activities as political citizens. For example, as another UNDP report shows, women's participation in the decision making processes in Albania has remained below women's participation in other East and Central European countries (UNDP 2005, 73). Notwithstanding country specific circumstances, the most important factor of women's political citizenship is women's self-identification as political agents that can bring about positive changes in the lives of themselves and other citizens in their respective countries. This condition is crucial for women in understanding and rightfully exercising their political citizenship rights within civil society and other political decision-making bodies.

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