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The Socialist Model of Woman in Poland and its Soviet Prototype

by Agnieszka Zembrzuska

Introduction

Poland, among many other Eastern European countries, for a half of a century was a satellite of the Soviet Union, the state that provided the main source of political, cultural, and economic patterns and indicators to be followed.¹ Those influences obviously were not stable, shifted with the time and, additionally, had to adapt to a certain context of the satellite country with its own history and traditions.² The so-

¹ B. Lobodzinska, "The Family and Working Women during and after Socialist Industrialization and Ideology," in *Family, Women, and Employment in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. B. Lobodzinska (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 1995), 4.

² A. Jasinska and R. Siemienska, *Wzory osobowe socjalizmu* (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1975), 181–192. Raymond Williams, analyzing the Marxists' attitude towards tradition, writes: "What we have to see is not just 'a tradition' but a *selective tradition*: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification." *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115.

cialist patterns concerned all spheres of public and private life, including the model of womanhood that was designed to subvert and replace hitherto ones.

The task of this paper is to give account of the socialist model of woman that on one hand was following the example of the corresponding Soviet model, and on the other to certain degree had to take account of the local particularities. No effort is needed to notice that basic principles of the revolutionary concept of woman, such as equality of sexes and emancipation through work, were alike in the Soviet Union and Poland (as long as in the others countries of Eastern bloc), nevertheless there are various dissimilarities emerging from diverse traditions and use made of them by Polish socialist propaganda.

The first part of the paper describes the Soviet concept of The New Man as one of the postulates of the revolution of 1917, with the special focus on the ideal of woman as an immanent part of it. I shall discuss briefly the emergence of reflection on women from Marx and Engels, through Lenin to Alexandra Kollontai—the first woman who had a significant contribution into the discussion of revolutionary reforms in the life of women and family. The debate on the role of women in the new socialist state had most passionate moments in the 1920s and 1930s, but as early as 1918 a new Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship had been adopted. In spite of the title, the main declaration of the new regulation was “withering away” of the family. Quarter of century later, some reflections of the fathers of socialist movement on the position and role of woman formulated in the Soviet Republic into laws, came into force in Poland, although in a less severe way.

Second part of the paper will present the particular application of the socialist model of woman into the Polish conditions. Although socialist ideology in principle opposed traditional image of woman and fostered new role model of working woman, particular traditional elements, such as patriarchal relations, were nevertheless made fit to the new framework of society and the state. The model of the socialist woman in Poland was a compilation of Soviet patterns and local traditional models: the Polish Mother model and the peasant model of working woman, in 19th century transformed into the model of woman-worker.

Origins of the Socialist Woman

Marxists Reflection on Woman

The socialist ideology, intending to define and apply a model of The New Man, had in mind two purposes, negative and positive. Firstly, The New Man was designed as a strong negation to *bourgeois* model considered to be oppressing for women by way of economic exploitation and hence introducing social classification according to property status. Secondly, The New Man as a radical but positive alternative, focused on the virtue of collectivity and friendliness that could be acquired, according to Marxist thinkers, only among those who were possessionless and could devote themselves to the well-being of the whole community.

Any reflection on transformations of what I will call the New Woman, initiated by the Soviet revolution, cannot be separated from parallel consideration on family and gender roles. The first Marxist reference to the situation of women can be found in Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class of England* (1844), the book that discussed detrimental influences of capitalism on the family, particularly women and children as the biggest losers of industrialization and generation of capital in the hands of owners of means of production. Engels observed that forced by economic pressure to enter the work-market, women were not able to reconcile new duties with household labor and child care. In this book he made an important observation (developed later together with Marx in *The German Ideology*) of gender division of labor at the household, where women and only women were responsible for domestic tasks and child-care. Capitalism, in their view, began to subvert the traditional roles by incorporating women as a workforce that could even produce reversal of gender roles.

The analysis of the family made by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* was crucial for successive approaches to the family role and importance in all socialist countries, as it rested on the fairly original understanding of the problem. The very possibility of women undertaking male (so far) roles, enabled Engels to notice that male dominance at home might not be merely *natural*, as was widely believed, but might also be a *social* relation. The family then, is a kind of mode of production, where woman (worker) is oppressed by her husband (owner). She produces and reproduces for the sake of the family. Moreover, they claimed that the very origin of private property commenced in the family, as the power of the man depended on his possession of labor and sexuality of woman. In this sense, she was the first form of private property.

Social transformations undergoing in capitalism were giving a chance of liberating women by transferring domestic labor from the private to the public sphere, from individual to collective. Proletarian family was highly idealized by Marx and Engels in this book and the following ones, as lack of property they believed was likewise a proof of deep emotional relations between the family members. Property in such an utopian image of the proletarian family, had to be regarded as an impediment on the way to mutual love of the partners, property was a source of hatred and evil.

Women's emancipation, then, would be possible to realize exclusively on the way to socialism: through elimination of private property and establishing of a community that would take over domestic duties. Liberated from household labor, women would be able to concentrate on their emotional relations, as economic ties would stop being a source of everyday troubles.

The theory of the evolution of family, its dependence on property resulting in oppression of women, was once more undertaken by Engels in 1884 in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Although capitalism, claimed Engels, created a chance for women to come to voice by involving them in the production processes, only socialism would make them free, when organized community would take responsibility for domestic labor, as well as for education of children. Transformation of *private* concerns to the public sphere would automatically put into question the role of the marriage and family. Not having prevailing concerns any more, men and women would focus on sexual life: all sexual relations would be freely chosen or broken, without any interference from the state.

Bolshevik Woman, Free Love, and Family

Theoretical investigation on the position of the woman in the capitalist society made by Marx, Engels but also by August Bebel and Clara Zetkin, had enormous impact on Soviet theorists, such as Lenin or Alexandra Kollontai, and resulted in numerous legal regulations that aimed as a target to re-define the social roles of women in post-revolutionary period.

One of the goals of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was “withering away” of the family as a site of bourgeois relations, a source of oppression of women and individualistic longings which could not have been accepted in The New Social Order. Alexandra Kollontai, one of the Bolshevik leaders, writer, and the first woman minister responsible for the social services, considered family as an institution bringing more harm and injustice to all parties than possible advantages. Taking over of household labor by the state could abolish an economic interdependence of family members and hence made the institution of the family obsolete. Neverthe-

less, she was conscious of the fact that in the transition process from capitalism to socialism family might still be useful, till the time, the state would be fully able to overtake household duties and child-care.

Discussing opinions of Kollontai, it is unavoidable not to mention her “free love theory” inspired by Engels and Bebel. Shifting domestic labor from the private to the public was accompanied by reflection on another crucial aspect of women's life that needed to be revolutionized as well: sexual relations. Here the attitudes differed from libertarian advocates of the “glass of water theory”, like Kollontai, Bebel, and Zetkin, to the more cautious and conservative views, like Lenin's. According to the “glass of water” theory (known also as “free love theory”, or the theory of “winged Eros”) in a truly communist society sexual needs would be as easy to satisfy as having a glass of water quenches thirst.

Lenin declared himself as opponent to free sexual relations pointing out its resemblance to “good old bourgeois brothel”³ (from letter to Clara Zetkin). Discussing with Zetkin, he stated that immoderate concentration on sex that some of the socialist revealed “springs from the desire to justify one's own abnormal or excessive sex life before bourgeois morality and to plead for tolerance towards oneself.”⁴ Explaining his opposition to free sexual relations, he remarked “Nowadays all the thoughts of Communist women, of working women, should be concentrated on the proletarian revolution, which will lay foundation, among other things, for the necessary revision of marital and sexual relations.”⁵

Kollontai, on the other hand, presented diverse point of view on the actual stage of the revolution. According to her, main revolutionary goals had already been achieved and the time had come to revolutionize sexual life, to let “winged Eros” couple men and women for the sake of collective harmony. It was a mere illusion, she claimed in her essay “Make Way for Winged Eros”, that bourgeois marriage was founded on mutual love of the partners. On the contrary, it was guided “by the desire to prevent the distribution of capital among illegitimate children,... directed towards the concentration of capital.”⁶ True love, partnership and friendship of

³ M. Heller, *Cogs in the Soviet Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man* (London: Collins Harvill, 1988), 200.

⁴ *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 689.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 690.

⁶ A. Kollontai, *Selected writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 284. Quoted by L. Kürti, “The Wingless Eros of Socialism: Nationalism and Sexuality in Hungary,” in *The Curtain Rises: Rethinking Culture, Ideology, and the State in Eastern Europe*, ed. H.G. DeSoto and D. Anderson (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 268.

both sexes would be realized beyond the institution of marriage and family, as they demand the space free from economic and social interdependencies.

The ideal of companionate union of partners after withering away of the family, required women to be equals with men. It did not mean, by any chance, the equality of division of domestic labor (as was pointed above, the responsibility for it would be taken by the state institutions), but equality of chances for individual development. “The Soviet marital ideal of the 1920s was a partnership of equals, a union of comrades founded on mutual affection and united by common interests.”⁷ One would like to ask, “what interests” and “for how long”?

There is one characteristic feature of the Bolshevik idea of reform of household labor. Instead of solving gender conflict in respect to labor distribution at home, the idea was to transfer it to the public realm, saying that “One task is to free men and women from petty household labor.” The negative attitude toward this kind of work is seen immediately. Lenin' showed a strong reluctance to household labor describing it as “unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, and stultifying drudgery”⁸ and argued for socialization of domestic tasks, as a method of emancipation of women.

Socialist Woman in Poland

Working Woman

One of the slogans of the new, post-war Polish socialist ideology, became *gender equality*. This was officially introduced and legally guaranteed a few years after the war, by the Constitution Act of 1952. Following quote of the first socialist constitution of 1952 (§ 66) will give a picture of how the new regime conceived of gender equality and how intended to secure it:

“A woman has equal rights with man in all areas of a state, political, economic, social and cultural life. The guarantees for equality for women are: (1) equality with man's right to work and salary according to the rule “equal wages for equal work”, the right to rest and relaxation, to social security, to education, to honors and distinctions, to occupying public posts; (2) protection of mother and child, protection of pregnant woman, paid leave of ab-

⁷ W.Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 6.

⁸ V.I. Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women* (New York: [publisher???], 1934), 63. Cited by Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 5.

sence before and after childbirth, development of maternity wards, obstetrics hospitals, child-care centers, kindergartens; development of services and canteens.”

The actual reason of the state's interest in the transformation of the woman's position in the society had an economic motivation. “Equality” was to secure both sexes equal access to jobs, even those traditionally restricted to men (heavy industry, public transport). In the face of rapid industrialization, nationalization of private property and planned economy in the 1950s, women became an indispensable part of workforce.⁹ The need of incorporating women into workforce challenged the traditional roles of women as mothers and wives and demanded a new kind of family politics. “Right to work” as a prerogative of the new state had to establish new proportions between family and professional life.¹⁰

Still the aims put forward by the state would not have been possible to achieve without the promotion of the new role model for which the worker became the ideal. Polish socialist propaganda in films and posters of the 1950s did not differ much from what was promoted in neighboring countries. We still have in memory an image of a young/strong/healthy/smiling/proud woman on the tractor or on the construction. Socialist realism in Poland, the official current in literature, art and architecture at the turning point of the 1940s and 1950s offered the image of a woman in which the stress was put on her abilities as a worker rather than mother and wife (woman on the tractor is a paradigmatic example here). The women's representations were originally intended to weaken traditional family model and attempted to assure that women equally to men were active participants and actors of the new regime. Characteristic for the 1950s type of novel, so-called *production novel*, promoted the image of young activists particularly with the worker-family background, devoted to the goals of the party, critical about the past and its values, and for whom work represented one of the crucial values.

⁹ R. Siemienska, *Kobiety: nowe wyzwania. Starcie przeszłości z terażniejszością*, (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1996), 20.

¹⁰ Lobodzinska, “Family and Working Women,” 6.

Tradition, Family and Socialism

Nevertheless, socialist ideology's approach to the role of the family in Poland never mirrored too closely the Soviet radical patterns. Clearly the Stalinist period was distinguished by promotion of women as workers, which was particularly seen in the propaganda posters, films, literature, yet socialist ideology endeavored to incorporate elements of traditional roles in the new circumstances and make them fruitful for socialist aims. There are many similarities and connections between former heroic and patriotic features of the womanhood that evolved during past several hundreds years, personified in the figure of the Polish Mother, and the socialist model of womanhood. Both share the idea of devotion and sacrifice. The Polish Mother ethos appeals to the particular roles women played in supporting national spirit in the most hard moments of Polish history as not merely biological reproducers but as transmitters of national values. The socialist propaganda made use of this ethos, transfiguring the devotion to Polish national identity (in which Catholic religion played also enormously significant role) into devotion to socialist state's political goals. Socialist gender ideology attempted to compound in the new model of woman two elements: heroic matriarchs-protectors and workers-producers.¹¹

Officially the idea of engaging women into work was supported by the system of state institutions (free of charge nurseries, kindergartens, paid maternity and educational leaves) that were intended to take over familial duties. Similarly as in the Soviet case, equality remained merely an empty slogan and reluctance of the state towards the patriarchal family turned out to be only apparent and even led to further consolidation of patriarchal relations. Partnership relations in the family were practically absent and women had to carry the double burden: of work in the public sphere as well as at home. Very soon it became clear that institutional help was not sufficient to solve the problems that the families had to face, like the shortages of goods, housing problems, etc.

Socialist regime interest in the family and the woman's roles in the Polish society shows to be very unbalanced, depending on the actual political and economic situation and resulting in numerous shifts in the state politics towards women. Stalinist period was marked by the accentuation of professional activity of women which had priority over the traditional roles of mothers and wives. Events of October 1956 made clear the discrepancy between ideals and reality and put into question

¹¹ A. M. Zajicek and T.M. Calasanti, "The Impact of Socioeconomic Restructuring on Polish Women," in Lobodzinska, *Family, Women, and Employment*, 181.

identity patterns centered around value of work. This time brought appreciation of intelligentsia, as a group necessary for development of the whole society. Although representation of women in literature changed radically in comparison to previous period, women were shown in the very traditional roles and within emotional bonds. Familial roles dominated those of a woman as worker, and at this time love, instead of work, seemed to be the crucial value in the woman's life.¹² Again in the time of so-called "small stabilization" of economy in the 1960s, privacy and individual needs became anew appreciated, but the promoted model of woman combined both functions: familial and professional.¹³ Against expectations, in the 1970s the demography rate was still low and in the face of the economic crises women were returned to the family, named 'the basic cell' of society and intended to be a main source of human satisfaction.

In Peggy Watson's opinion, consolidation of traditional, patriarchal roles in the socialist countries of Central Eastern Europe was twofold: on the one hand, it was still preserved in the official propaganda despite declared gender equality, and on the other, in the face of state interference in the private sphere and lack of civil society, "traditional gender identity was also heightened as a cultural resource for both survival and resistance" and formed "an important aspect of the nostalgia for 'normality' which has been so often expressed as what people most hope for from change in Eastern Europe."¹⁴ Family, then, served as "a niche within the system," which still was the place of relatively minimal manipulation of the socialist state and which could develop into a site of opposition activity.¹⁵

Conclusions

The socialist model of woman, originally very close to its Soviet prototype, was nevertheless constructed in slightly different cultural and social conditions. It is necessary to mention the relationship between propagated patterns and their response in the society. The discrepancy between models and reality considering women happened to be enormously big (after all not only in Poland). Neither

¹² A. Kloskowska, *Z historii i socjologii kultury* (Warsaw: PWN, 1969), 436, 445. Cited by Jasinska, *Wzory osobowe socjalizmu*, 216, 224.

¹³ F. Adamski, *Modele malzenstwa i rodziny a kultura masowa*, (Warszawa: PWN, 1970), 88. Cited by Jasinska, *Wzory osobowe socjalizmu*, 232.

¹⁴ P. Watson, "Eastern Europe's Silent Revolution: Gender", *Sociology* 27 (3): 472–3 (1993).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 480.

submitted women fully to the demands of the propaganda, nor the socialist state fulfilled its numerous promises concerning revolutionization of family life. In spite of intensified propaganda which using literature and media, women very often did not identified themselves with enforced new model of life. According to a surveys carried in the 1970s and 1980s aimed at researching the influence of promoted models on the reality, questioned women revealed inadequacy of required norms of behavior and activity to their own lives.¹⁶ Such discrepancy points at instrumental use made of women under socialism which wished to make them “transmitters” of particular ideology.

¹⁶ F. Adamski, *Modele malzenstwa*; A. Kloskowska, *Z historii i socjologii kultury*; and T. Ludwiczak, “Kobieta na lamach swoich popularnych czasopism,” in *Kobieta polska lat osiemdziesiatych*, ed. A. Bujwid, (Warsaw: Niezalezna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1988).