

Chapter 4

Overcoming the “Delay” Paradigm

New Approaches to Socialist Women’s Activism in Georgia and Poland

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Laws alone are not enough ... however, we have done everything required of us to put women in a position of equality, and we have every right to be proud of it. The position of women in Soviet Russia is now ideal as compared with their position in the most advanced states. We tell ourselves, however, that this, of course, is only the beginning.
—Lenin, “The Tasks of the Working Women’s Movement”

I met Tsinovar, an economics professor, at Tbilisi State University during my first visit to Georgia in the winter of 2011 to conduct research on women’s activism under socialism. In the course of a two-hour interview, Tsinovar shared that she had enjoyed a good life during the socialist period: “I was very lucky because I had the best things in my life. Intellectually, I had all possibilities ... my generation had all opportunities ... I did not pay anything for my education, the government supported me in my travels abroad. It was a very different life [as compared to today].”¹ Tsinovar described her involvement with the Communist Party as pragmatic, and explained her choices as practical decisions that led to a happy and satisfying life, which laid the ground for her current engagement as a “gender expert” in Georgia. Tsinovar, in her seventies at the time of the interview, noted that:

My generation was not orthodox communist. Here in Tbilisi, but also in Moscow, we had a very modern imagination. And I never felt uncomfortable with

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myself ... I changed my life three times. I studied English philology, and then I entered economics, which was not typical for a woman. I had a very interesting political life. I was a member of a political party. When the Soviet era ended, it was very difficult ... the new economic situation made me think that I had to change something again. In 1996 my colleague told me about an international granting program at the United Nations. And that is how I started to work with "gender." "Gender" appeared in my life as a surprise. And to be honest, I was not very interested at first, but now it is very important to me.

In September 2012, I interviewed Halina, also an economist, who served as the Polish delegate to the 1985 United Nations conference in Nairobi, and was a member of the late socialist government in Poland; she was also former director of the Committee for Household Economics, a nationwide women's organization active in socialist Poland. During the course of a summer afternoon we spent at her apartment in a Warsaw residential district, Halina repeatedly asserted that she had made autonomous choices under state socialism. Even as she noted certain of the system's faults, Halina remarked on the value of her work as a state official and as an activist for women, and argued that the contributions she and her colleagues made to gender equity remains unacknowledged in dominant historical accounts of postwar politics and society. She also talked about contemporary politics in Poland, expressing dismay at how the socialist past is consistently misrepresented, dismissed, and misunderstood. "During the time I was active," Halina said, "all [our actions and activities] were reasonable, though [from the vantage point of the political present] perceptions about our actions have changed." She explained that contemporary revisionist history looks down on women activists of the communist era: "We are all under attack—all the women's movements and other organizations are condemned in this new, harsh, and disparaging historical perspective. That should not be."

This chapter aims to recast "second generation" socialist women's activism as part of the genealogy of women's movements in postsocialism. The findings presented here are part of a larger project based on semi-structured interviews with women who were active in communist parties and women's organizations during the 1970s and 1980s in Poland and Georgia. The project focuses on questions about women's experiences and agency before 1989. In an effort to apply specific grand feminist theory to the context of postsocialism, I critically assess the value of "experience as evidence" as it relates to women's agency in pre-1989 Georgia and Poland. I argue that the women's narratives of the communist past are not to be treated just as accounts of what happened, but more as expressions of lived experiences that can add to our understanding of women's equality issues under state socialism.

To better understand the complexity and diversity of women's equality as a socialist project, I employ aspects of postcolonial theory structured around and in relation to the problematic category of "the West" to challenge existing constructions of postsocialist women's movements as "delayed" as compared to those in the West. I consider ways in which socialist women were positioned within the trajectories of transnational women's movements. By revisiting the problem of the place of pre-1989 women's activism in genealogies of women's movements, I speak partially in an attempt to formulate a response to the dominant approach that represents Western "modernity" and "development" as a paradigm for achieving progress in the area of women's rights, and state socialism as a "lag" in the genealogy of the women's movement—not only in the region, but also transnationally.

Historians of women's movements in postsocialism have only recently started to explore questions about the impact of women's emancipation under socialism on current debates on gender equality. Following critiques about the relevance of existing feminist theoretical frames—developed in Western Europe and the United States—to the postsocialist context, there is now growing scholarly interest in "local" trajectories of women's movements, including those of socialism (Havelkova and Oates-Indruchová 2014).

Works that focus specifically on the period of state socialism challenge the idea that feminism was imported to postsocialist states from the West (Ghodsee 2012), and argue instead that the 1917 Russian Revolution had inspired a wave of revolutionary struggle across Europe and beyond (de Haan 2014a; Fidelis 2010). These studies draw on the previous research by scholars such as Barbara Evans Clements that position Bolshevik women activists such as Alexandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand as original socialist feminists who combined a rejection of Western bourgeois feminism with a struggle on behalf of women workers (Evans Clements 1994; de Haan 2016). These new works by Ghodsee, de Haan, Fidelis, Deskalova and others help inspire contemporary feminist activism in the words of Alexandra Kollontai, who in 1909 argued that "however apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of society, without which the liberation of women cannot be complete" (Kollontai 1984).

By means of their archival studies and oral history projects, Evans Clements and Fidelis illuminate how the state socialist project of women's emancipation proposed by Kollontai evolved over time. They document continuities between the state socialist period and postsocialism in terms of the ways "gender equality" strategies have been formulated. Neverthe-

less, mainstream feminist narratives tend to dismiss or ignore the contributions of feminists such as Kollontai, and of subsequent generations of women who remained loyal to communist ideas as sources of inspiration for struggles for women's equality in both the West and the East. Existing feminist works on "gender" under socialism often operate within what Fidelis calls the "totalitarian paradigm" (de Haan 2014b): where women's rights are concerned, they portray the period of state socialism as a time of stagnation, and rarely consider this period a part of feminist genealogy (Fuszara 2000). Instead, mainstream feminist scholarship tends to stress the ways in which women were victimized by the regime, thereby erasing the positive contributions of the socialist project to the lives of many women, including those who chose to become active participants in the socialist political structure. Such scholarship also fails to make connections between state socialist women's activism and current gender discourse at the local and global level (Funk 2014).

"Women's Experience" under State Socialism: A Critical Approach

The role of critical historians, sociologists, and anthropologists has often been defined in terms of expanding knowledge by embracing the contributions and perspectives of the marginalized individuals and groups—those whose lives were not taken into account in mainstream historical analyses. The notion of "experience" is crucial to knowledge production and to feminist theorizing, which has long been used to bring forward the experiences of women. In feminist studies, "women's experience" emerged in the United States in the 1970s as a tool for incorporating what had previously been unrecognized in studies of history and the social sciences (Harding 1987). Feminist standpoint theory was the epistemological argument for acknowledging distinct "female" or "feminine" knowledge through recourse to the experience of women. Experience became a ground for studies that told "truths" about women's lives, in contrast to the purportedly distorted representations in mainstream, male-dominated social sciences.

Over time, feminist researchers became more attentive to the variety of women's experiences and the multiple positions from which these experiences could be "told." Some, including historian Joan Scott, suggested that "experience" is produced out of different contexts and discourses rather than simply "discovered" during research. She famously argued that experience must be historicized, a product of social structure and ideology (Scott 1991: 26). Knowledge and knowledge production are situated

within relationships between existing and available narratives and the collective histories of the various groups to which one belongs. To avoid the trap of the naturalization of difference, studies of marginalized groups of women must account for intersecting identities and the ways contemporaneous narratives of gender, class, and other relevant ideological and material structures shape experience. The concepts of gender, class, and social location must be studied simultaneously as coproducing and reproducing the experience.

A number of feminist scholars, many in postcolonial studies, have argued against abandoning the use of experience as a potential source of critical scrutiny (Narayan 1997; Mohanty 2002). Mohanty, for example, offered a more nuanced approach to "experience" by recognizing various material realities of women's lives around the world. More recently, one goal in studies of postsocialism has been to reconstruct the diversity of women's experiences, as these narratives intersect with official accounts of the socialist past and with culturally accepted ideas about women's roles in political processes (Nowak 2006). Studies of women's activism under state socialism challenge existing representations of womanhood under socialist regimes, while critically approaching the narratives constructed by research participants. In the case of my own research, the narratives I have collected may destabilize dominant visions of women's lives under state socialism by undermining the idea of the homogenous experience of women from the entire Soviet Bloc. My findings challenge the representation of socialist women as passive victims of the regime, and call into question the dominant understanding that contemporary women's activism is separate from their pre-1989 activism. My research suggests that there is continuity between the past and the present.

Destabilizing the homogenous representations of women's experiences and activism during state socialism (both in terms of time and location) is a crucial starting point for the analysis of women's diverse trajectories within state socialism. In the Soviet Union, the socialist concept of equality transformed over time. In 1917, the strike of women textile workers on International Women's Day under the slogan "Opposition to the war, high prices, and the situation of the woman worker," triggered the February Revolution (Evans Clements 1994). Later, Alexandra Kollontai, Inessa Armand, Konkordia Samoliova, and other women played a crucial role in incorporating issues of women's equality into revolutionary goals, arguing that Marxist politics cannot be successful without women's emancipation (*ibid.*). The Bolsheviks recognized the need for a special body within the party to lead the work on women. They introduced radical provisions after the 1917 revolution, including nominating Alexandra Kollontai as the commissar for social affairs, and established the Zhenotdel (Women's De-

partment of the Russian Communist Party) in 1919. Revolutionaries, both female and male, understood that to free women from full responsibility for the family was a condition for their emancipation. Leo Trotsky argued:

To institute the political equality of men and women in the Soviet state was one problem and the simplest ... But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an infinitely more arduous problem ... All our domestic habits must be revolutionized before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family, in a normal sense as well as in the conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality in social work or even in politics. (Trotsky 1923)

During its brief existence, the postrevolutionary government offered a hint of what women's emancipation in socialist society would look like: it introduced laws establishing full social and political equality for women (including the right to vote and to be elected), the right to divorce at the request of either a husband or a wife, the rule of equal pay for equal work, paid maternity leave, and a state-funded childcare system. In 1920 abortion became legal, and women were able to obtain free abortions in state hospitals (Evans Clements 1994). The Stalinist era marked a backlash against women's equality, with oppressive policies including the closure of women's departments in 1929 and delegating abortion. The new vision of womanhood promoted during the era of "the thaw" focused on reinventing women's roles primarily as mothers, an idea that was partly supported by *Zhensovety*, state-dependent women's organizations established in 1931. The "stabilization" period of the 1960s and 1970s, the crisis of the 1980s, and perestroika marked further departures from the socialist ideal of women's emancipation (Hrycak 2002).

In Catholic Poland, "radical" socialist solutions were introduced briefly after World War II, and the idea of bringing certain "private" issues into the public domain was rarely discussed. Since certain social policies on women's behalf were required from above, authorities attempted to modify these mandates to fit with the pre-socialist, traditional conceptions of women's social roles that were deeply rooted in Polish society's commitment to Catholicism (Fidelis 2010). Women-centered policies enacted during the postwar period focused on including women in the rebuilding effort (encouraging women to work in "male" professions) and ensuring their high fertility (by building daycare centers, liberalizing divorce and parental leave laws, providing maternity leave and healthcare for pregnant women and infants, offering nursing breaks, and providing breast-milk banks). The major goal of the Women's Department (established in 1946) of the Polish Workers' Party was to encourage women's mass participation in the Communist Party and the League of Women, an autono-

mous group that was re-established in 1945 as a continuation of the pre-war organization by the same name.

During the "thaw" in Poland that followed Stalin's death, the traditional family structure favored by the Catholic Church was consolidated. The doctrine of "humane socialism" proposed after 1956 aimed at building the new order with old forces: the socialist state was seen as rooted in the traditional family, for which the figure of "Mother Pole" remained crucial. Important legal changes marked this shift. Since 1956, abortion was available only for married women who already had children (Fidelis 2010). New institutions were established to help women manage the "double shift" of work inside and outside the home. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the League of Polish Women and the Committee for Home Economic Affairs (established in 1957) promoted "practical activism," designed to help women cope with the challenges of combining full employment with household responsibilities (Nowak 2005).

These national and transnational histories of the transformation of the state socialist women's equality provide context for interpreting the personal narratives of women active as the regime's agents over the decades. Whether actions of the women were instances of feminist consciousness is now vigorously debated by scholars from the region and beyond (de Haan 2016). Some argue that three generations of women politically and socially active under state socialism after the revolution of 1917 were dedicated activists: they fought for social justice and women's equality, and they regarded communism as the best way to achieve these goals. Their role in shaping the socialist state project of equality changed over time, as did their priorities: devoted communists in the Soviet Union of the 1920s were replaced by the "practical activists" of later decades (Nowak 2009). And while the agency of these women often does not meet the standard definition of proactivity based on free will and directed toward radically reshaping social reality, it represents an instance of "reactive" agency, which centered on implementing state design policies and goals (de Haan 2016).

Socialist Women: Stories from Georgia and Poland

Socialist women activists tell stories of the grand historical transformations that intersect with their memories to form personal narratives of a past mediated by contemporaneous constructions of "what happened." Julia, a professor of physics and a native of Tbilisi who had moved to Sukhumi, was a devoted party member. In an interview with me in 2011, Julia's narrative helped tie the experiences of the second and third generation of socialist women's activism to the work of Bolshevik women activ-

ists. Her story dismantles a popular belief that women were merely passive witnesses to the workings of the socialist system, manipulated into a “false” ideal of equal participation while they faced the difficult reality of the double burden. Julia describes her experience:

Originally many things in the Soviet Union were planned according to original East European feminist thought. Some of its elements stayed on formally, but the substance was lost with time ... In my early years I learned about Aleksandra Kollontai—not as a feminist but as an ambassador of the Soviet Union. It was never described by official propaganda as a feminist work, but as the work of an outstanding woman ... I don’t know if quotas were officially implemented, but [in the Soviet Union] everybody knew that one vice president of the Communist Party in Abkhazia would have to be Abkhaz, another Georgian and the other Russian. And everybody knew that one should be a woman—at least 30 percent women, altogether.

Julia uses herself as an example of how the formal or informal quota coincided with individual life trajectories, choices, and passions. “When I graduated from university,” Julia explains, “I was offered party membership. I was not comfortable with that because the stereotype then was that if you are a bad academic then you join the party to advance your career. So I refused.” Yet after a period of consideration, Julia changed her mind about becoming a member of the party. “I was reading a lot then,” she explains, “and there were very one-directional studies relating to communism. For me it was important to do something, to be active. And during that time [party membership] was the only option.”

Rosa, a gynecologist and endocrinologist—born in Kutaisi, grew up in Moscow, and was retired in Tbilisi at the time I interviewed her—describes her reason for becoming a Communist Party member. “If the person who studied for the doctoral degree wanted to go to international conferences, they had to become a member of the party. So I joined.” For Rosa, party membership was a pragmatic move that did not limit her work as an autonomous scientist. “I had knowledge and it was respected. I was never undermined because I was a woman. I was always free to travel. There was no political pressure at work.”

Lia, a teacher who lives in Tbilisi, describes herself as “active from a very young age.” Born in Abkhazia, Lia became a leader of the Komsomol² while in primary school. At later points, she was elected head of the student association, and was the Komsomol leader at her workplace. She was a third and later a first secretary of the City Committee, a unit Lia describes as focused on “working with youth, organizing the free and cultural time of young adults.” Lia noted that most of her activities within the party were planned from above. Even so, Lia “felt free.”

Nana, a Tbilisi-based historian, described her work in a university Communist Party organization as "The Secretary of Dissidents." Nana, active since 1960, noted that the party unit at her institute helped to publish books, provided assistance to vulnerable members of the community, and facilitated discussions on current events. She pointed out that it was within the party as an organization where important issues, including multiculturalism and ethnic tensions, emerged and were critically debated. Nana recognizes that her position in the party had enabled her to put forward ideas and discuss concepts that she would not have been able to examine otherwise. She argues that the Communist Party provided a space for such examination that did not exist elsewhere outside the system. Nana also noted that her political position had made it possible to defend colleagues who criticized the regime; she had often saved them from going to prison and had helped their families.

Like Nana, Julia describes actions that could be accomplished within the party system. "My party unit in Sukhumi was always very open," Julia explained. "We had people with different opinions. We talked mostly about work because it was a scientific institute. I was lucky not to experience ideological pressure. We were not talking about ideology but about how to improve our scientific work. Of course there was no freedom to do everything. But I think I was quite independent."

Halina, the former director of the Committee for Household Economics, explained that the main purpose of that organization was to implement new government policies. She enjoyed a certain level of autonomy. "Nobody ever imposed what the research program would be," Halina explained. "No one ever told me that I can or cannot work with a factory or a professor. But it is absolutely true that all of these organizations were under the supervision of the party. And all of us had a party 'guardian' who would attend our meetings from time to time. But I never felt forced, or that someone would tell me what I must do."

In terms of the gendered aspects of her social position, Halina commented on the maternity provisions introduced in Poland after World War II that were not as revolutionary as those in the Soviet Union, but nevertheless helped restructure the social gender hierarchy. "I, with three children, had a certainty that no one would fire me; that no one would tell me you can work as long as you don't have children. These problems didn't exist at all. Having children was not an individual choice of women, but the expression of certain attitudes, the recognition of motherhood as a social role, which required support from the society. As a boss I knew exactly how it was when my employees said to me one after another, first child, second child, pregnancy—and maternity leave and parental leave, every time. [Each time] I had to find someone else for their

place, but they would say, 'I'm not giving birth for myself. I'm doing it for the society.'"

Eteri, a Tbilisi-born engineer, appreciated the socialist system because it allowed the possibility of having two children while still being a student, and later on it provided her with the opportunity for professional work, despite being a divorcee raising two children alone from the time they were toddlers. In Eteri's words: "The biggest achievement [of the socialist system] was making women and men equal, at the same salary ... The system brought stability that sometimes is more important than autonomy." At the same time, Eteri observed the system's flaws. "There was always discrimination because women used to work in the jobs that were harmful to their health, just to make as much money as men ... You always knew what would happen and that you would have stability ... but we could not organize—we were not in charge of our lives." Likewise, Julia pointed to the double burden that she had experienced as a working mother: "There were obstacles, when you had this additional work at home. My son was very sick at a young age, so I spent a lot of time in hospitals. That influenced my academic career."

Although by and large the women whom I interviewed asserted that the system had provided women not only with legal but also practical equality, they were also aware of its often hidden sexist face. As Lia explained, "[e]quality was often declared, but everybody knew that the men held all the power." Julia also remarked: "I heard comments about me being a woman. I was very surprised by it because equality was something natural to us, so we didn't spend time reflecting on it. We had facilities and formal equality. Ija, an anthropologist and the mother of two children, noted: "The system of state kindergartens freed women and allowed them to work. But in the end, I think I would have achieved more professionally if I hadn't had children."

Lia, Nana, Eteri, Julia and other women have provided narratives that demand recognition of their agency and the multilayered nature of social and professional interaction. Their stories exemplify the complexity of life under state socialism, and challenge the idea of women as passive victims of the system. By providing accounts of experiences of women who lived and worked in the satellite states of the Soviet Union, these narratives provide a new context for discussing the concept of "agency," within the omnipresent influence of culture and socially constructed beliefs. They suggest that the notion of agency as a "socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" is a more suitable interpretative framework for understanding the experiences of women under state socialism than is the romantic idea of free will (Ahrean 2004: 306).

These narratives can also become a starting point for examining the place of state socialist women's activism within the genealogies of femi-

nism, both in the region and transnationally. Many of these women were active during and after the fall of communism as members of organizations acting on behalf of women, refugees, and the poor. Some define their activities under state socialism as feminist; others reject the label. Rosa states, "I am a feminist because my whole life I worked for women." But Eteri argues, "Feminist? I don't know what that means. I am for normal relationships between women and men." As they challenge the applicability of Western-defined notions of "feminism" into postsocialism, these stories reveal the blurred distinction between past and present engagements for women's equality and for "feminist" and "para-feminist" women's agency.

The stories told by my respondents destabilize the existing paradigm that defines the relationship between state socialism and postsocialist gender relationships in terms of disruption and discontinuity. Julia argues that although she had been a member of the Communist Party in the past, she only discovered feminism after the fall of the Iron Curtain. She describes her experience:

During the Soviet period, feminists such Alexandra Kollontai were represented not as feminists, but as extraordinary women. I started to discover feminism after the [Abkhaz] war [in 1993]. Women took all responsibilities into their hands. They worked professionally and at home. On top of that, they had to take care of the men who felt left out after the war, when many of them started to drink. So for women it was not a double but a triple burden, and they had to find ways to deal with it.

The trajectories from communist activism to feminism that are inscribed in the stories of the women who were then and still are socially and politically active illuminate the neglected connectivities between "then" and "now." As such, these narratives of socialist activists go against existing conceptualizations of the relationship between the post-1945 and post-1989 women's activism as disruption, which renders state socialism as a "gap" period in the history of women's movements. Thus, these narratives provide a basis for understanding the significance of socialist "state feminism" in the genealogy of the European women's movements. It is important to "rediscover" each country's experiences of the past in order to understand current failures and new opportunities in the area of gender equality.

Beyond the "Developmental" Lag: Progress and Regress in "East" and "West"

Contemporary debates in transnational feminist theory remain centered around and in relation to the problematic binary of the "Global North"

versus the “Global South.” In these debates, the so-called “Second World” remains largely absent. In addition, dominant constructions represent postsocialist states as uniformly on board with processes of Westernization, which tends to exclude Second World critiques of the West and the First World (Regulska and Grabowska 2013). In these constructions, the historical generalizations of the relationship between “transnational,” “postcolonial,” “postsocialist,” “center–periphery,” and “Western” and “Eastern” Europe continue to mask particularities in favor of universal categories and binary representations of transnational feminist politics. Stereotypical images of postsocialist societies represent the region as failing to enter the process of modernization, or as delayed in the process of modernization as compared to the “West.” Such representations also negate that under state socialism, a mode of modernization alternative to Western capitalism was implemented in the area of gender equality. As we have seen, the state socialist project of “women’s equality” that emerged from the work of nineteenth-century Eastern and Western feminists remains unexamined as a source to link resistances that emerged in postcolonial contexts with those developed in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Any examination of women’s agency under socialism and transnationally must pay attention to the particularities of each social and cultural context while keeping sight of the global processes that emerged from the region and beyond. Postcolonial feminist scholars problematize the category of experience in the context of global feminist theory and practice, and particularly in the context of the production and reproduction of hegemonic representations of non-Western women (Naples and Desai 2002). Pointing to the imperialistic feminist politics that reifies images of Third World women in dominant narratives of the West, these scholars illuminate the crucial role that positionality and location play in feminist knowledge production (Mohanty 2002). Still, these analyses often disregard that similar processes have taken place in the “Second World,” a location “invented” by the West European Enlightenment. Larry Wolff (1994) argues that, since the eighteenth century, the countries east of Germany have often played the role of the “little other,” a space between the civilized “West” and the barbaric “Orient.” This cultural imaginary served the purpose of illuminating the so-called developmental lag that separated the West from all its “others.” The division between West and East Europe has persisted with remarkable tenacity for centuries. Its latest embodiment was the “Iron Curtain” that separated the Soviet states from the “civilized” West.

Some of these themes were taken up by the Georgian and Polish women I interviewed. For example, Julia, the professor of physics from Tbilisi, challenges the notion of progress in the area of “women’s rights” as at-

tributable solely to the West. Educated in both Soviet history and Western feminist theory, Julia explained that the Soviet Union was in the forefront of providing women's rights and emancipation:]/t[

Under socialism, there was what we call "formal equality." We, as women, also had equal opportunities, at least in the sphere of education. During the Soviet period, certain provisions existed that were supposed to ensure that women who devote a lot of time to their families also have enough time to work. It was good. I'm not sure if women in developed countries have such opportunity even now.

Julia also argued that it was the legacy of Bolshevik women's activism that laid the groundwork for ongoing developments in various areas of women's emancipation, including reproductive rights. In making reference to the "original East European feminist thought," she alludes to the fact that leaders of the 1917 Russian Revolution had from the beginning made combating women's oppression a central aspect of their revolutionary project. Her narrative supports the argument that the early Bolshevik activists can be seen not only as "actors," whose actions were rule-governed, but also as "agents," who exercised power and had the ability to "bring about effects and to (re)constitute the world" (Karp 1986). This changed during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s when sexual politics, as Kollontai understood it, disappeared.

Postsocialist feminisms have yet to reflect critically on the ways in which the images and projections of the West impact the ways in which local feminist pasts and presents are constructed. A tendency among post-1989 women's scholars and activists was to harshly critique the earlier generation for leaving a "gap" in the history of women's movements, both locally and globally. Today, scholars of post-state-socialist feminisms pose different questions, including about how to recognize East European feminisms as an indispensable and original site for the ongoing formulation and reformulation of global gender theory and practice. Recent research such as that produced by Małgorzata Fidelis and Francesca de Haan emerged from the region. Their work represents a departure from the staid conceptualizations of East European women's movements, which represent the state socialist period as a time of "stagnation" as far as women's rights are concerned (de Haan 2014b; Fidelis 2010). They demonstrate that various forms of women's agency were also possible within the socialist state, and suggest that so long as we insist on using "Western" feminist frames to evaluate the existence of feminism under state socialism, various forms of "gender politics" under socialism will remain unrecognized.

The year 2015 marked the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth United Nations Conference of Women in Beijing. On the transnational feminist

front, women from the “Global North” and “Global South” are seen as leading mobilizations against discrimination and for greater gender social justice. Scholars are now beginning to recognize the role of state socialist women’s emancipation in shaping international women’s movements (Popa 2005; de Haan 2014a; Ghodsee 2012), and to understand that the second wave of the feminist movement that emerged in the United States and Western Europe in the 1960s was to some, if not a large, extent shaped by the larger political and cultural frames of the international fight for peace and development. For example, state socialist activism was a leading force behind the foundation of the Women’s International Democratic Federation in 1946 (de Haan 2014a), and socialist policies that foregrounded women’s equality by implementing constitutional changes and institutionalizing health and social welfare provisions were foundational for future international emancipation discourses, including those of the European Union “gender mainstreaming,” which focus on gender economic equality, women in the labor market, and ways to balance work and “life” activities.

Conclusion

In 1990, Teresa de Lauretis argued that a key feature of any feminist critique is that it remains “conscious of itself” — part of our work as feminist scholars is to examine the terms of our own theories and discourses (de Lauretis 1990: 116, 131). In the context of de Lauretis’s call for internal feminist critiques, the studies of state socialism that are emerging in the region and beyond have to be examined as twofold projects that: (1) aim at “recovering” forgotten histories while challenging existing conceptual frameworks; and (2) analyze the state socialist experiences of women, including those who argue that, under socialism, agency was only possible outside of the Communist Party power structure.

The ambivalent effects of systemic transformations on women’s rights became a critical preoccupation of feminist scholars working in and on Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The question of the impact of the legacies of socialist emancipation projects remains on the margins of postsocialist feminist thought. Previous generations of scholars of gender equality in Central and Eastern Europe stressed the unique political traditions and historical legacies at work during and after state socialism. At the same time, they took for granted that the West was the sole logical point of reference for what were imagined as marginal East European feminisms. In these works, the authors represented women under state socialism as passive witnesses to the workings of the authoritarian sys-

tem, caught up between the "double burden" of professional work and household responsibilities. They suggest the system did very little to challenge extant gender regimes, and they ignored that under state socialism, women had the right to legal abortion, received maternal provisions and extensive childcare services, and were massively present in the labor market—standard policies in socialist states.

In this chapter I have argued that new conceptualization(s) of women's agency under authoritarian regimes is needed to fully comprehend the complexities of women's lives under socialism in Georgia and in Poland. Emerging scholarship on women's agency under state socialism centers on the female capacity to act within the socialist system, and links state socialist conceptualizations of gender equality with the current struggles for women's rights at regional, national, and supranational levels. By recognizing the state socialist period as one involving a multilayered web of interactions, this new approach contributes to the delineation of the diverse trajectories of women's movements in the region, pointing to its various, often seemingly contradictory, origins.

At the transnational level, acknowledging state socialism as a part of the genealogy of the women's movement after socialism illuminates how local legacies of gender equality intersected with the arrival of global, supranational gender discourses after the fall of state socialism. In consequence, it can also broaden the definition of the transnational women's movement, and expand the dominant understanding of the genealogies of gender equality discourse. Recognizing the role of socialist "state feminism" in the genealogies of the European women's movement, and recognizing state socialism as a part of the genealogy of the women's movement after socialism, can help overcome the enduring tendency to evaluate East European feminisms solely in relationship to the West, and help establish connections with other non-Western locations. The delineation of common effects that genealogies of nationalism and Eastern and Western imperialism had on women—including the complex trajectories of feminisms within anti-imperialist movements, uneasy relations with nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms, the experience of racism, the continuing struggles to negotiate a feminist relationship with local narratives of a motherland, and a transnational positionality vis-à-vis the West—can serve as a stepping stone for establishing transnational solidarities between the feminisms from Eastern Europe and the "Global South" (Jayawardena 1994; Heng 1997; Naples and Desai 2002).

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Notes

1. This chapter draws on results of a research project with members of communist parties and women's organizations active before 1989 in Poland and Georgia. The research was conducted between 2010 and 2014, when I was the EC Marie Curie Reintegration Fellow at Warsaw University (grant number 256475). The fieldwork was conducted with the support of the Polish National Science Center for the project "Bits of Freedom: Women's Agency in Socialist Poland and Georgia" (project number N 116673140). The research involved conducting over fifty individual tape-recorded interviews, gathering field notes and conducting archival research. The fieldwork was conducted in several locations, including Tbilisi, Kutiaisi, and Gori in Georgia, and Warsaw, Łódź, Zgierz, and Szczecinek (among other sites) in Poland. The interviews in Georgia were conducted in Russian, and translated into English by the author. The names of all research participants in this chapter are pseudonyms.
2. The Komsomol was a communist youth organization (ages fourteen to twenty-five) founded in 1918. The name of the organization is an acronym of the words *Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhi* / *Kommunistyczeskij Sojuz Molodiozy* (Communist Youth Association).

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