

MAGDALENA GRABOWSKA

# Bits of Freedom: Demystifying Women's Activism under State Socialism in Poland and Georgia

KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI'S 1987 FILM *Przypadek* (Blind chance) tells the story of a young man, Witek, attempting to catch a train to Warsaw. In the three scenarios that follow Witek becomes, by turns, a devoted Communist Party member, an opposition movement member, and leads a "normal," apolitical life as a doctor, husband, and father. *Przypadek* covers themes of destiny and chance under state socialism<sup>1</sup>; it illustrates the limited possibilities in the authoritarian state and represents one person's life as held up by both individual aspirations and available systemic options. It is, in short, a classic. But like in many Polish screen masterpieces, it is ultimately a man's life that is at stake. The film presents the history of postwar Poland as a struggle between men involved with the Communist Party and with the opposition movement, and routinely ignores the experiences of women. What were the choices available for Witek's possible female counterpart? Would she have been able to take advantage of the women's equality provisions introduced in Poland after 1945, becoming a career woman or a Communist Party official? How much could she have achieved within the institutional framework provided by the socialist state, the Communist Party, and assorted women's organizations?

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1. In this article, I use the term "state socialism" to refer to the governance, inspired by Marxist ideology, of the former USSR and its satellite countries.

Existing accounts of life under state socialism frequently represent women as passive witnesses to the workings of the system, caught up between the authoritarian socialist state, the double burden of professional work and household responsibilities, and a lack of sincere political representation.<sup>2</sup> Feminist approaches to state socialism consider it to be an alternative mode of women's emancipation in comparison to Western capitalism; they tend to suggest it was a system that did very little to challenge existing gender regimes and argue that socialist state foundations of male domination were "transformed but never eliminated."<sup>3</sup> These approaches usually conceptualize the period of state socialism as a time of "state patriarchy" where the power of the state over all women replaced the power of one man over one woman.<sup>4</sup> They evaluate the work of the previous organizations as responsible for, in the words of feminist scholar and activist Sławomira Walczewska, "the current passivity of women, and their inability to organize and defend their collective interest."<sup>5</sup>

Women's activism under socialism even today reads as being inauthentic or lacking a true emancipatory spirit, with women activists themselves represented as weak, naive, or cynical and certainly not capable of standing up to the socialist state. Socialist women's actions are not seen as feminist, as they do not correspond to feminist notions of agency that are based on free will and the active resistance to the patriarchal status quo.<sup>6</sup> While recognizing their participation in opposition movements or their so-called behind-the-scenes roles (as wives

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2. Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life After Socialism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Barbara Einhorn and Charlotte Sever, "Gender and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 5, no. 2 (July 2003): 163.
  3. Éva Fodor, "Smiling Women and Fighting Men: The Gender of the Communist Subject in State Socialist Hungary," *Gender and Society* 16, no. 2 (April 2002): 236.
  4. Olga Voronina, "Soviet Patriarchy: Past and Present" *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 112.
  5. Sławomira Walczewska, "Liga Kobiet: Jedyne organizacja kobieca w PRL" [The League of Polish Women: The only women's organization in PRL (Polish People's Republic)], *Pełnym Głosem*, 1 (1993): 4.
  6. Nanette Funk, "A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women's Organizations, Women's Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (November 2014): 344.

and lovers of opposition activists or party members) as the only ways in which women could exercise their agency and political involvement, many existing feminist works still cast the socialist activists of women's organizations as generally acting against women's political interests.<sup>7</sup>

I wish to challenge such representations by presenting the results of the ethnographic research I have conducted in Poland and Georgia since 2011.<sup>8</sup> My goal is to point to the diverse modes of women's agency under socialism as a starting point for recognizing post-War World II Eastern Europe as an indispensable and original site for the ongoing formulation and reformulation of global feminist theory and practice. Fundamental to such conceptualization of feminist agency is a pursuit of the notion of agency "as the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" and an exposition of the argument that conceptions of agency and practices of women's movements vary from context to context, as do their interpretations.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the commonplace view, women under state socialism were often active and innovative within both state institutions and women's organizations. Women's activism shaped the rights to legal abortion, maternal provisions, extended childcare, and the mass presence of women in the labor market, which were all introduced in socialist states before they manifested in Western societies as the "successes" of the women's movement.<sup>10</sup> Although scholars have, by

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7. Shana Penn, *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

8. The research discussed in this article was conducted from 2010–2013, during which time I was a Marie Curie reintegration fellow at Warsaw University. The fieldwork—interviewing members of the Communist Party and various women's organizations from pre-1989 Poland and Georgia—and archival research were conducted with the support of the Polish National Science Center (project titled "Okrucy Wolności. Aktywna podmiotowość kobiet w socjalistycznej Polsce i Gruzji," project number N 116 6731 40). The study involved conducting individual interviews with women active in the Communist Party and women's organizations during state socialism in Tbilisi and Gori in Georgia and in Warsaw, Łódź, and Szczecinek in Poland. The recruitment of women for interview utilized the "snowball" method. Methodologically, this research utilized narrative interviews with flexible topic guides or questionnaires, which were organized in thematic fields.

9. Laura M. Ahearn, "Literacy, Power, and Agency: Love Letters and Development in Nepal," *Language and Education* 18, no. 4 (2004): 305.

10. Barbara Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

and large, treated women's Communist-era organizations as arms of the Communist Party, we still know little about the women who functioned in these groups, their aspirations and goals, and the ways in which they evaluate state socialism now.

Recent research and scholarship emerging from Eastern Europe and beyond depart from staid conceptualizations of Eastern European women's movements and aim to condemn the usual representations of the state-socialist period as a time of stagnation where women's rights are concerned.<sup>11</sup> Analyses that connect state-socialist emancipatory projects with women's participation demonstrate that various forms of women's agency were also possible within the socialist state.<sup>12</sup> These works also 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 will remain unrecognized.<sup>13</sup>

It is in following these approaches that I aim to bypass the overbearing notion that socialism was unanimously and irrevocably "bad" for women. I begin this essay by addressing some of the methodological aspects regarding the research on state-socialist women's agency and pose the question of the relevance of the post-state-socialist space to debates on some categories of feminist analysis, including those of "location" and "affect." I then move on to address three aspects of women's agency under state socialism. First, I aim to reconstruct trajectories that led women to become part of the socialist state, particularly focusing on their motives and the ways in which they conceptualize the choice to become engaged within socialist-state institutions. Secondly, I

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11. Francisca de Haan, Kristen Ghodsee, Krassimira Daskalova, Magdalena Grabowska, Jasmina Lukić, Chiara Bonfiglioli, Raluca Maria Popa, and Alexandra Ghit, "Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited," *Aspasia* 10 (2016): 102.

12. Kristen Ghodsee, "Rethinking State Socialist Mass Women's Organizations: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985," *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 49.

13. Francisca de Haan, "Gendering the Cold War in the Region; An Email Conversation between Malgorzata (Gosia) Fidelis, Renata Jambrešić Kirin, Jill Massino, and Libora Oates-Indruchova," *Aspasia* 8 (2014): 162; Magdalena Grabowska, "Bringing the Second World In: Conservative Revolution(s), Socialist Legacies, and Transnational Silences in the Trajectories of Polish Feminism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 385.

recount women's assessment of the autonomy they enjoyed in state-socialist institutions. Did their involvement at a local level and in women's organizations ever translate into "real" political power? I focus on participation in political parties and women's organizations in an attempt to counter the general view that spheres of politics and social organizations under state socialism were not engaging for women and that other domains, such as opposition movements, constituted more efficient sites for women's agency. Finally, I explore the ways in which socialist women position themselves in relation to contemporary women's movements. By revisiting the problem of how to render the socialist period in genealogies of the women's movement, I aim to tackle the question of the construction and reconstruction of the narratives of the origins of the women's movement both locally and globally. I thus write this article 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 that presents state socialism as a lag in the genealogy of the women's movement — not only in the region, but also transnationally.

#### TOWARD THE FEMINIST METHODOLOGY OF STATE SOCIALISM

It is a truism that so-called Second World, the post-Socialist countries of the former Eastern bloc, remains largely absent from current feminist theoretical and methodological debates that focus either on dismantling the homogenizing notion of "women," challenging the Western-centric feminist knowledge production, or in posing a critique of the dominance of the linguistic in feminist theories.<sup>14</sup> Ongoing feminist debates frequently fail to connect post-state socialism to wider questions concerning the dynamics of power related to the politics of interpellation and representation, knowledge production, and transnational feminist politics, and only marginally consider post-state socialism as the site of ongoing formulation and reformulation of global gender theory.<sup>15</sup> Exist-

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14. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Sisterhood, Coalition and the Politics of Experience," in her *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 106.

15. Manisha Desai, "Transnational Solidarity: Women's Agency, Structural Adjustment, and Globalization," in *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics*, ed., Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai (London: Routledge, 2002), 14.

ing stereotypical images of Eastern Europe represent the region as one that has failed to enter the process of modernization or as being behind in the process of modernization when compared to the West. This serves only to encourage representations of women in post-socialist states as located in between East and West, often reducing their situation to a mere point of reference, or casting women from Eastern Europe in the role of passive recipients of global politics and transnational feminist theories.

The aim of the ethnographic research I have undertaken in Poland and Georgia between 2011–2015 is to challenge such representations and demonstrate that examining the ambivalent effects that socialist revolutions and transformations had on women, particularly in the area of economic and reproductive rights, can become a productive tool when comparing multiple, intersecting experiences of women in various locations. Marxist feminist activists and their followers have developed a distinct theoretical framework and practical apparatus for fighting for women's liberation that impacted trajectories of women's movements locally and transnationally, which should not be dismissed or ignored. A careful delineation of a "map of debates around cultural production and reception of the diverse feminisms around the globe," as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan suggest, can help us understand state socialist women's activism and help us locate this historically specific formation as a part of an alternative history that can enhance possibilities for feminist alliances both locally (across generations) and globally (across theoretical and material borders and boundaries).<sup>16</sup>

Over the last three years I have met over sixty women who were active in social organizations and political parties during the period of state socialism. Women such as these, now between the ages of 65 and 95, do not appear on the pages of feminist history books with any regularity, they attend feminist meetings sparingly, and they are rarely recognized as being part of women's movements. But they continue, in many cases, to be a lasting support group for each other, providing friendship for former colleagues and services for the communities they sustain. Looking in from the outside, while they may appear to be a uniform group, these former socialist activists often do not have much in common. They

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16. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 9.

represent different family backgrounds, social classes, and various geographical locations from small industrial towns to bona fide metropolises. Their paths to and through state socialism differ as well. For instance Halina, now in her nineties, was the daughter of small-town Polish intellectuals and is a former Polish minister of economy. When I met her in Warsaw in the summer of 2012, she revealed that her decision to become a member of the Polish United Workers Party (a Communist Party of Poland) was partially a gesture of rebellion against her parents who had backed the opposition party. Marina, a rural Abkhazia native in her eighties and a former vice director of a consumer supplies factory in Abkhazia, says becoming a party member was a necessary step as she made her way up the professional ladder.

While Halina sees her involvement in the party as a way of channeling “diverse interests and ideas,” Marina describes it as something that she had to do to keep her job.<sup>17</sup> Their paths through the post-1989 transformation are also different. Halina, who, as the head of a women’s organization, a member of the Polish government, and an officer in Poland’s Plenipotentiary for Women (established for the advancement of women following the UN Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985), climbed to high levels in the Communist Party’s hierarchy and later made the transition from political career to private, quiet support for contemporary Polish feminism. Marina, on the other hand, strengthened her ties to the women’s movement during the post-1989 transition: following the war in Abkhazia in 1993, she fled Sukhumi and currently heads an IDP (internally displaced persons) women’s organization in Kutaisi, Georgia. She works with women who, like herself, were forced to flee their homes in the region of Abkhazia after the armed conflict there in 1992–1993.

Given the differences between these and other histories I collected, writing in singular terms about the experience of women’s activism during socialism becomes a questionable task. Over the last few years of this research I have been constantly reminded that this notion of “experience” — central to Western feminist scholarship and activism in the 1960s and 1970s — provides us with marginalized women’s accounts of

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17. All quotations are from interviews with members of the Communist Party and various women’s organizations from pre-1989 Poland and Georgia, conducted between 2010 and 2013. All translations into English, from Polish, Russian, and in rare cases Georgian, are mine.

their lives and makes their stories more visible in public discussions, while at the same time acting as a homogenizing category that universalizes women's identities. Postcolonial feminist scholars who have problematized the category of "experience" in reference to the politics of location, global feminist theory and practice, and, in particular, in the context of the production and reproduction of the hegemonic representations of non-Western women, pointed to the fact that the hegemonic politics of feminism can reify images of Third World, non-Western women; they illuminate the crucial role that positionality and location play in feminist knowledge production.<sup>18</sup>

Destabilizing the homogenous representations of women's experiences and activism during state socialism (both in terms of time and location) is crucial to the analysis of women's narratives and the reconstruction of state-socialist and post-state-socialist women's movements in relation to the West. The seventy-year history of state-socialist equality cannot be seen as homogenous, neither in terms of time nor space. The socialist concept of equality has transformed over time: from radical provisions introduced by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 revolution that included nominating Alexandra Kollontai as Commissar for Social Affairs and the establishment of the *Zhenotdel* (the Women's Department of the Communist Party), through the Stalinist era with its oppressive policies such as the closure of women's departments and the delegitimation of abortion, and through the "new" visions of womanhood promoted during the so-called Khrushchev Thaw (the stabilization period of the 1960s and 1970s) when state-dependent women's organizations such as *zhensoviety* (women's councils) and the League of Women implemented state-designed equality policies, to Perestroika and the collapse of state socialism during the 1980s.

As Poland and Georgia represent different historical trajectories of elaborating socialist concepts of women's equality, state socialism in these two locations is represented differently in official historical narratives and in the narratives of the women I spoke to. Women's equality meant something different in Georgia, formerly annexed as part of the Soviet Union, than it did in Catholic Poland, a satellite state of the USSR.

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18. Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*; Uma Narayan, "Undoing the 'Package Picture' of Cultures," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1083.

In the Soviet Union, the emancipation project, at least initially, was born out of the struggles of Bolshevik feminists such as Alexandra Kollontai, Konkordia Samoiloova, and Inessa Armand, who argued that “if women’s liberation is unthinkable without communism, then communism is unthinkable without women’s liberation.”<sup>19</sup> While agitation and propaganda were the major goals of the Women’s Department or *Zhenotdel* (established in 1919 and led by Kollontai), the department’s leaders were also attentive to the challenges faced by working women.<sup>20</sup> They demanded that the socialization of domestic duties, such as cooking and childcare, be implemented alongside provisions that aimed to certify women’s economic independence. This included the right to a divorce, benefits for working mothers, and the recognition of children born of out of wedlock.<sup>21</sup> Some women I spoke to in Georgia still make the connection between certain provisions fought for by Bolshevik activists and the policies of the socialist state that they lived in. For instance, Julia, a biology professor from Sukhumi, traces women’s attitudes toward abortion in socialist Georgia to the 1920s. She says,

In many cases women ultimately turned to abortion. Back then . . . it was not a taboo . . . Maybe this was a remnant of original feminist theory that was based on the sexual freedom of both sexes, but has since been distorted. Because this system was, at first, built on the original feminist thought of Eastern European feminists, such as Alexandra Kollontai. Later on their visions became just a formality: they were lost, they lost their content.

In Poland, on the other hand, there is definitely a stronger sense that Soviet-style emancipation was imposed from above, even though the women involved in building the new system after 1945, such as Edwarda Orłowska and Eugenia Pragierowa, were often active in pre-war socialist and Communist movements. In Catholic Poland, “radical” socialist measures for women’s equality were introduced only briefly

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19. Inessa Armand, quoted in Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1979), 155.

20. Barbara Evans Clements, *Daughters of Revolution: A History of Women in the U.S.S.R* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson 1994), 39.

21. *Ibid.*, 41.

after the Second World War, and the idea of making some private issues public never fully entered open debate. As it was introduced early in the 1950s, the Polish project concerning women's equality was mainly (re) shaped after Stalin's death, during the period of the Khrushchev Thaw, which, as Małgorzata Fidelis demonstrates, had ambivalent effects on women's rights. In her 2010 book *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*, Fidelis argues,

On the one hand, coercion in the workplace decreased. Women could voice their views more freely, including those on persistent discrimination in the workplace and at home. Some were able to leave full-time employment, often in horrid conditions, and devote themselves to full-time homemaking, if they so wished. And the state liberalized its anti-abortion law, making the procedure more readily available.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, however, the "humane" socialism proposed after 1956 sought to reconstitute the pre-war gender contract; the new gender order was, therefore, inspired by traditional values to which the figure of Mother Pole remained not just prominent, but crucial. This new regime employed progressive measures such as liberal abortion laws to serve its own goals of raising a "healthy socialist family," rather than fulfilling the demands of the women's movement. For instance, a 1956 change in the Polish abortion law made the procedure available only to married women who already had children. This seemingly progressive law did not give women the ultimate power to make reproductive decisions until it was amended in 1960.

The personal stories of state socialist women activists reflect the different trajectories of women's equality in Georgia and Poland. In these accounts, the grand historical narratives intersect with different layers of personal memories and current approaches to state socialism to shape accounts of "what happened." As a result, these women's experiences of state socialism is always discursively structured: what a person sees and understands is always structured by what one can conceptualize and articulate. The versions of the past are mediated through existing and available discourses and narratives: the discourses on transformation

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22. Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 170.

and post-1989 feminism are among the most powerful. In Georgia, the transformation—accompanied by an economic crisis and an armed conflict—is often seen as a failed process, and the narratives on previous decades are sprinkled with tears for lost peace and prosperity. In the case of many Georgian interviewees, talking about their lives and work in the USSR brought back positive memories of a time when their country was among the most prominent of the USSR republics, and women activists were eager and excited to talk about their memories of these times. For many of these women, the civil war was the single most important event related to the fall of socialism. Galina, an IDP doctor now living in Tbilisi, relates, “We Georgians are very easygoing people. Under socialism everybody read books, we went to work then to the park or a theater. There was nothing else to do but we made the most of it. Then there was the war and it all changed.”<sup>23</sup>

In Poland, on the other hand, the dominant historical narrative presents state socialism as an authoritarian regime that was imposed from above by the Soviet Union after World War II. According to the official narrative, the cooptation of Poland as a part of the Soviet bloc represented a certain kind of colonization, the case of an intra-European imperialism that can be traced back to Poland’s partition from the eighteenth to the twentieth century when Poland was divided between three European Empires: Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Prussian. Since socialism is presented as a formation that was forced on the country, it was, according to the national liberation narrative, something that “real” Poles opposed and fought against.

As in Poland, because being involved in the socialist state is something that is commonly decried, many Georgian women began their stories belittling their ties to the regime, often looking for words to justify and/or rationalize their past choices. They say, “I was in the party, yes, but I was never involved, I never held any important functions,” or

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23. Armed conflict, which led to the secession of some of the former Georgian territories, began in 1992 with the 1991–1992 war in South Ossetia, followed by the war in Abkhazia (1992–1993), both of which resulted in separation of territory from Georgia. During the Soviet era, Abkhazia and Ossetia were part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (Georgian SSR). The more recent conflicts from 2008 over South Ossetia and Abkhazia had a lesser impact on the narratives I collected, as the wars in 1990s were more explicitly associated with the transition from socialism.

"I never hurt anyone." After some initial hesitation, a narrative of pride, nostalgia, and satisfaction takes over, emerging as a parallel or an undercurrent to feelings of disgrace and shame. Ninety-year-old Wiesława, a retired director of a clothing factory in Łódź, makes an ardent defense of her past: "I can look back with pride, as something that I left behind." She adds, "I was the head of the factory for thirty-five years, and not once was I carried out by my employees in a wheelbarrow.<sup>24</sup> Instead, on every name day, I have many phone calls from my employees."

Tears, laughter, nostalgia, and shame, but also irritation; the subject of women's activism under state socialism triggers intensive reactions not only among my research participants, but also with audiences to which this material has been presented thus far. Over the last few years, I was surprised to note how nonneutral the topic of women's activism under socialism is. At almost every presentation that I have given on this research, at conferences and seminars in Poland, Georgia, Western Europe, and the United States, some participants felt compelled to challenge the value of the histories gathered, either by calling into question the sincerity of the respondents, or by rejecting their point of view as being completely worthless given their loyalty to the authoritarian socialist state. They argue, and to some extent I agree with them, that like all accounts of propaganda in a socialist state, my sources could simply not be taken at face value. At the same time, drawing on feminist epistemology, I challenge such doubts by noting that no objective and neutral narrative can exist anyway. I hold ambivalent emotions toward my research topic as well. It would be negligent of me to not address my own experiences of growing up under state socialism in Poland. On the one hand, I am aware of how state socialism impacted my gender consciousness, from having a mother who was able to work and bring up two children on her own, to being able to participate in both cooking and welding classes at school. On the other hand, recollections of long food lines and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness still dominate and cloud my memories of state socialism. Given the charged responses to my presentations, the fervent attitude of my respondents, and my own ever-evolving emotional stance on the period I'm researching, I

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24. During the time of upheavals against Socialist regimes, the most hated directors of factories could find themselves removed from their factories by workers using wheelbarrows.

find the contemporary turn to affect theory within feminist studies very fruitful.<sup>25</sup>

For research on state socialist women's activism, invoking the affective in the knowledge production process is the most important aspect of the current debate. Affect here can be conceptualized as a potential link between the prediscursive and the discursive, and it critically assists how one conducts, analyzes, and receives feminist research. In studies of state socialist women's activism, it can prove useful when probing the questions of desire (to make sense of one's past, to be more like the West) and shame (of the socialist past) as powerful explanatory factors in reconstructing collective and individual narratives as to what happened. Wiesława's vigorous attempt to defend the agency of the women of her generation exemplifies what is essential to an "affective turn": the work of reconceptualizing negative emotions, including shame, as key components of the process of individual and collective subjectivation.

**"I MADE A RATIONAL CHOICE": WOMEN'S TRAJECTORY  
TO POLITICAL PARTIES AND WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS**

The women I interviewed rarely, in fact almost never, considered themselves passive victims of the previous system. They see their choices as informed and, given the existing conditions, to a certain extent, autonomous. The contexts for their decisions, however, differ. In Georgia, encouragement from the party is often mentioned as the primary reason why women became involved with the state. In many cases, membership in the Communist Party was a direct condition of professional advancement. Jasmina, an eighty-year-old food technologist, states her position bluntly: "When I was asked to become the director of a financial office, membership of the party was obligatory." She believes strongly that it was due to the mechanisms for women's advancement that were present

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25. Feminist scholars' interest in affect most commonly evidences a shift from epistemology to ontology, a call for the revision of the feminist stance on the body and the material, and the dissatisfaction with the political impasse of the feminist theory caused by constructivism's preoccupation with the discursive. Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 548; Anu Koivunen, "An Affective Turn?: Reimagining the Subject of Feminist Theory," in *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings Disturbing Differences*, ed., Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen (New York: Routledge, 2009), 8.

in the Soviet Union that she reached influential positions in both her professional and political life: "In Soviet times there were quotas in the workplace and in the party. You wanted or you didn't want; there had to be a certain percent of women and men." The quotas to which she refers were implemented in the Soviet Union, although none of my interviewees were able to pinpoint their precise legality. Julia, a biology professor from Sukhumi, started her academic and professional work in the early 1960s. She says, "I don't know if the 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."

A proposition to join the party was not an offer one could refuse, but some women managed to maneuver it to fit their personal goals. Alvina, now in her eighties, a Tbilisi native, engineer, and the former head of regional *zhensoviety*, recounts, "I was a very good student so I was asked to become a member of the pioneer organization and then the *Komsomol* [Communist Party youth organization]." After she graduated from polytechnic, Alvina decided to quit the *Komsomol*, partially because she dreamed of becoming an academic and partially at the request of her father, a victim of Stalinist repression. She continues her story: "So I went to the head of the party committee and told him I no longer wanted to be in these organizations. But he said: 'wait a few days, and then come back.' They pulled a few strings, and when I return they offered me a position as the head of the regional branch of the *Komsomol*. Of course they influenced me, even though I didn't want it." Alvina gave in to the party's search for women and took up the full time job at the *Komsomol*. With time, however, she was also able to fulfill her calling to teach. "After 1961," she laughs, "I was working in the factory and teaching."

When state socialism was introduced to Eastern European countries in the wake of World War II, quotas remained as tools for women's emancipation projects in all socialist states; however, they were introduced differently depending on the social and cultural context and local political legacies. In Poland, which after 1956 followed its own path to socialism comprised of socialist values mixed with traditional nationalism and the special place of the Catholic Church in the public sphere, quotas were not taken quite as seriously as in the Soviet Union. Often the

need to promote women to higher positions was rationalized from the perspective of women's new roles, which were modified to fit pre-socialist beliefs about the characteristics of women (e.g., collectivism, responsibility, and submissiveness). Wiesława, a long-time director of a textile factory in Łódź, recalls a conversation she had with a party official: "In the textile industry there were a lot of women in higher positions, so I asked him once, 'How come you have promoted so many women?' And he replied, 'because I don't have to worry, I'm at peace with them. I can trust them and I don't have to supervise them. They don't fight with each other and they don't fight with me.'"

In Poland some women recall that being in the party was well received by the workplace management, yet most of them represent their choice as a way of becoming active in their local communities. Their narratives illuminate how emotions and desires were formative not only of their individual subjectivities but also of social relations and modes of social and political mobilization. Janina, in her seventies, an accountant and a former head of her local branch of the League of Women, states: "I became a member in 1956, partially because my husband was in the party, but also because I wanted to participate in meetings; I wanted to know what was happening here, I wanted to get involved with the workplace and town politics. I wanted to know what would happen, where and when. I was curious, I wanted to participate."

For some women, membership in the party and women's organizations was a way of living up to the promise of the new classless society envisioned by the socialist state. Barbara joined the League of Women in the early 1960s, after she moved from her home village to a little town outside Łódź. She says, "In my case I came to Zgierz; I'm not from Zgierz. I was trying to accommodate and decently present myself in the way my mother thought of me. At first I was a member of a youth club; it was a workers' club where we organized dances. . . . And then I entered the League, I think maybe on Women's Day. I went to the celebration as a young woman and met ladies from the workplace unit of the League."

As they responded to existing political and institutional conditions and negotiated them, women in both Poland and Georgia often represent their decision to join the party as a rational choice, one for which they take full responsibility. Wiesława contests, "No one forced me to be part of it. I simply remained calm, I was there then, I considered it important. But if someone didn't want to be part of it they didn't have

to.” Halina, who graduated from Warsaw University in 1952 and began a career as a food technologist, climbing both professional and political ladders — she was appointed as the head of a women’s organization, a member of the Polish parliament, a delegate to UN conferences, and a member of the Plenipotentiary for Women — concurs: “During the time that I was active all of this seemed rational, though from the perspective of time, all that is changing. Simultaneously we are all under attack, all the women’s movements and other organizations are condemned by this new sharp and unforgiving historical view: that should not be the case.”

Julia, nearly eighty years old and a professor of biogenetics, first evaluated the party quota system as problematic and unfair from a professional point of view. She remembers, “When I graduated from university 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 her opinion thawed and she decided to join. She says of her decision, “I was reading a lot then, and they were very one-directional studies relating to Communism. For me it was important to do something, to be active. And during that time this was the only option.” Julia presents her decision as enlightened and also responsible in light of later developments, which brought disappointment in the party: “Then when I noticed a lot of mishaps affecting the party, and a lot of people subsequently leaving the party, it was unacceptable to me. I thought then that even people who were not very involved should be acting responsibly and remaining with the party.”

**“I BELIEVED I COULD HAVE AN IMPACT”: CARVING SPACES  
OF AUTONOMY AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATION  
WITHIN THE AUTHORITARIAN STATE**

Regardless of the quota, a glass ceiling still existed under state socialism; the highest ranked positions were still out of reach to women. “Of course a woman could not become a first engineer in a leading energy sector,” says Galina, the former head of the *zhensoviet* (women’s council) in Sukhumi. As many scholars in the region and abroad argue, official statistics regarding women’s participation in politics under state socialism have to be assessed critically: not only were the data censored, but the numbers did not translate into “real power,” which in all socialist states was in the hands of the Communist Party (headed exclusively by men)

rather than state institutions such as parliament or even local government. Julia, however, tries to convince me that the quota system was not a façade, that it was not a superficial formality as many people think, and that it was not unproductive from an emancipatory point of view. She points to ways in which it translated into the empowerment of women:

Of course not all women were prepared for the ideological or social work, but the remaining 70 percent of men were not prepared either, right? On both sides there were people who were able and capable of discussion. But thanks to the presence of women in powerful positions, they had opportunities to get to know people, go abroad, and – thanks to quotas – they had a broader perspective. It was positive, even though the structure was formal and decisions were made at the top.

In Poland, Wiesława determinedly rejects the idea that the presence of women in various institutions was not important: “I will tell you how important the voice of women was! I was a member of the Social-Economic Council in the *Sejm* [lower house of the Polish Parliament].<sup>26</sup> And as a representative of the Women’s League, I evaluated all the legislative initiatives, all the proposed legal changes. Then they were passed to the *Sejm*. So yes, we had an impact.” But Halina is less enthusiastic about the level of impact made by women’s representatives on party politics; however, she agrees that the presence of women in institutions was valuable: “It was seen as important because we could express what we wanted to the people who decided about the running of the country. Whether they took that into consideration is another story, but at least we were able to present our point.”

In her article “The Socialist Project for Gender (In)Equality: A Critical Discussion,” Raluca Popa argues that during state socialism women’s organizations enjoyed different levels of autonomy depending on the country. In Romania, for instance, the Council of Romanian Women remained the party’s unit, and all women active in it were

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26. This was an advisory body established by Polish Parliament in 1982, which consisted of 150 members (120 members, pre-1985) representing enterprises, farmers’ cooperatives, trade unions, and other social organizations. The council existed until 1989.

party employees.<sup>27</sup> In Hungary, on the other hand, women involved in the Hungarian Women's Council considered themselves to be part of a social organization that, to a certain extent, was independent from the state. A similar picture emerges from my interviews. The early Bolshevik policy on women's rights focused on integrating women into the party structure; the initial goal of the Women's Department (*Zhenotdel*) was to recruit women into the party and spread Communist propaganda among the female masses. The success of these efforts was minimal, but the department soon became a channel to protest against the policy of collectivization and the setting for spreading revolutionary feminist ideas. Stalin's strategy was to cut the "expensive" policies of women's equality proposed by the *Zhenotdel's* leaders, and the Women's Department was shut down in 1930, and activists such as Kollontai were purged from the party's elites.<sup>28</sup> *Zhensoviety* replaced Women's Departments in the 1930s as units within the trade unions that helped achieve certain policy goals including access to daycare and social assistance such as benefits for larger families.<sup>29</sup> Even though *zhensoviety* was not a party organization, it remained politically weak and dependent on the Communist Party. Many of the women to whom I spoke didn't even regard them as a separate unit. When I asked Marina, former vice director of a factory in Abkhazia, if there were any organizations that helped women solve problems they might have during the Soviet period, her response was emphatic and immediate: "No, there were none." "What about the *zhensoviet*?" I inquired. "Ah, yes! There was the *zhensoviet* in my factory and I was a head of it!" She continues, "The *zhensoviet* didn't do anything. We just organized some celebrations on Women's Day or May 1st."

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27. Raluca Maria Popa "The Socialist Project for Gender (In)Equality: A Critical Discussion," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 2, no. 6 (2003): 49–72; Raluca Maria Popa, "Translating Equality between Women and Men across Cold War Divides: Women Activists from Hungary and Romania and the Creation of International Women's Year," in *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*, ed., Shana Penn and Jill Massino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 59.

28. Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 58.

29. Alexandra Hrycak, "From Mothers' Rights to Equal Rights: Post-Soviet Grassroots Women's Associations," in *Women's Activism and Globalization*, 66.

Alvina, a long-serving mayor of one of Tbilisi's districts, explains the relationship between the Communist Party and the *zhensoviet* as follows:

The *zhensoviet* was not a party organization. But women's issues that the party and the *zhensoviet* dealt with were the same. When problems appeared, we helped with the assistance of the party. These were problems of big families with a lot of children, poor families, and families in which the mother was sick. But at times when our organization was helpless, we could only observe and then let the party know: you see, it was the party that had the money. So women from various levels of the *zhensoviet* would let us know about their issues. If we weren't able to solve them alone, then the party would step in.

In Poland, the League of Women claimed its continuity to the prewar organization of the same name that was founded in 1913. In 1945, it was established as an autonomous organization that retained close, personal ties with the exiting political parties, the Polish Socialist Party and the Polish Workers Party. The leadership of the League of Women was initially independent; only in 1951 was Irena Sztachelska replaced by the Workers' Party representative, Alicja Musiałowa. Until 1966, the League of Women also had workplace units that were abolished, presumably as a reaction to its involvement against massive layoffs of women in 1958, which resulted in a significant drop in its membership from two million to seventy thousand. Off the record, some of my respondents also linked this depoliticization of the League of Women at the end of the 1960s to the anti-Semitic campaign of the Polish government, since some prominent League of Women leaders were Jewish or were married to Jewish party officials who were purged at this time. The League of Women returned to the workplace in 1981 after the announcement of martial law, as its leaders proclaimed full support for the actions of the Military Council of the National Salvation, the institution that represented an authoritarian socialist state.

Similar to women's groups functioning throughout the Soviet bloc, the structure of the League of Women resembled that of the *zhensoviety* with the main board (*zarząd główny*) and regional, local, and town branches. The League of Women was associated with the Communist Party and typically followed party guidelines, but in the eyes of the

members to whom I spoke, the organization remained to some extent independent from the state. This sense of autonomy is represented most vividly by the way in which Polish activists talk about their work and their relationship to the authorities. Wiesława, who was a head of the regional branch of the League of Women in Łódź, argues, “*We fought* for establishing canteens in the workplace; these were a blessing for women during a time when there were chronic food shortages. *We fought* for establishing factory shops where women could buy produce rather than standing in queues for hours on end. Then there was the battle for daycare.”

Members of the League of Women recall vividly their struggle with the state with regards to changing the family code, divorce laws, maternity leave, and issues surrounding daycare. At the same time, their narratives suggest that there was also some room for disagreement within their own ranks. Wiesława, who started her career as a floor worker and ended up as the director of a factory, insists that having daycare in the workplace was crucial. She states firmly, “*We fought* for preschools and daycare in the workplace. In those days we only had three months of maternity leave and after these three months a woman would be back at work. I’m one such mother who went back to work after three months. But I had daycare facilities behind the wall of the shop floor, day and night. And for women this was very important.” On the other hand, Danuta — Halina’s colleague from the same League of Women branch — recounts, “*We fought* for the mothers who worked at various hours, who would go to work at 5 a.m. So they wouldn’t have to travel across the city with their children. We wanted these women to have daycare facilities on their street. Of course, we had weekly daycare as well. But not all women wanted to leave their children for that long.”

According to Basia Nowak, a historian who has researched women’s activism in Poland after 1945, women’s organizations performed several important functions during that period; from teaching skills to be good working housewives, to legal advice and psychological support, to the creation of women-only spaces for relaxation and entertainment.<sup>30</sup> While in the 1950s their work focused on fighting illiteracy and facilitating legal changes in the areas of childcare and divorce, during the

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30. Basia Nowak, “Where Do You Think I Learned How to Style My Own Hair?: Gender and Everyday Lives of Women Activists in Poland’s League of Women,” in *Gender Politics and Everyday Life*, 45.

1960 and 1970s the organization of domestic skills courses became the main area of “practical activism.” Established in 1957, the Committee for Household Economics was an organization—quite elaborate in structure—that combined the promotion of women’s economic emancipation with maintaining traditional gender roles.

Anna, who worked at the Committee for Household Economics for thirty years, describes its work:

We had administrative, training, and economic departments. We conducted research on the organization of the household: furnishing, budgeting, and economics in general. We also did research on household supplies: washing machines, kitchen robots, and refrigerators...and we had scientific literature, from Germany and France... The training department organized workshops where we taught women how to use these supplies. We organized annual workshops for trainers who then worked with the local League of Polish Women units.

Like many other women, taking courses organized by the League of Women’s Committee for Household Economics helped Barbara acquire a lot of household skills that she otherwise would not have learned at home. She remembers, “I was very bad at household work, I left home at the age of fifteen and my mom didn’t teach me anything. But there were fully equipped facilities there [at the League of Women] and they taught us how to cook, and all kinds of other things.” In the 1960s and 1970s in particular, the Committee for Household Economics and the League of Women focused on educating women for traditional gender roles that were to be combined with new roles in the labor market. In this sense, these institutions carried out the party’s orders among women to facilitate the so-called double burden of work and home life. But according to Halina, the former director of the Committee for Household Economics, the organization also enjoyed a certain level of autonomy from the party: “Nobody ever imposed on us what the research program should involve,” she states firmly. “No one ever told me that I can or cannot work with a certain factory or 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.”

Halina does not see the work of the organization as having resulted in a reinstatement of traditional gender roles in post-socialist states. She argues that along with certain social policies, organizations such as the Committee for Household Economics helped build a sense of entitlement and empowerment among women. Making motherhood a matter of public interest had shaped women's sense of validity and provided some extent of agency through the roles related to motherhood. Halina relates,

As a boss I know exactly how it was when my employees were saying to me, one after another, first child, second child, pregnancy and maternity leave and parental leave, every time. And I had to find someone else for their position. But they said to me, "I'm not giving birth for myself, I'm doing it for society." So they had a certain attitude. . . . Having children was not an individual choice for women, but the expression of a certain attitude, the recognition of motherhood as a social role that requires the support of society.

During the crisis years of the early 1980s, supporting women economically, as well as mobilizing them for economic activity, became the unofficial focus of the League of Women. During this time its branches became venues through which female members could get access to certain foods and goods. As a nationwide and state-connected organization, the Committee for Household Economics and the League of Women were in a position to provide their members with materials and organizational resources. Alina, a member of a branch in northwest Poland's town of Szczecinek, remembers, "There were branches of our organization in education and healthcare, women from the post office and the communication sector—we worked together. We brought textiles and blankets from the textile factory in Łódź. Since there were no clothes we had to make our own." Zofia, who headed Szczecinek's branch in the 1980s, explains her strategy when using state connections: "Close by here was a Russian army base. I'd go there to bring back thirty kilos of Russian candy, *kasha* [transliteration of the Polish for porridge], rice, and blankets. Whatever I could bring, from herrings to buckwheat. And then we divided it between us."

Such mobilization and mutual help sometimes morphed into income-generating activity. Bożena, from a local branch of the League of Women in the northwest of Poland, remembers that

the 80s were a very hard time. That's particularly true after 1981 when everything was compartmentalized and there was nothing in the stores. Life was very hard for women and for families. We started to think about how to help women, so we organized embroidery courses as we thought that something might come out of it. In one store we found linen sheets and we bought all of them... to make embroidered tablecloths. Later on I went to the consignment shop next to where I worked and convinced the owner to take on our stuff. She did and the next day she was waiting in front of my factory asking for more. There are German tours coming here and they want to buy our tablecloths. Then we decided to sell them in Gdańsk, and it was a good income.

Alina, who was in the same group, confirms this: "I could sell three of the tablecloths and the money lasted me a month, for me and my children."

In an ironic and unfortunate turn of events, many women in Poland have found the skills learned under state socialism to be useful during the transformation of the 1990s. Barbara lost her job after the factory in which she worked was privatized. Facing financial hardship, she was forced to put the skills acquired under state socialism to work: "When the transformation came about, it turned out my pension was really low. Since I'm single I started to have trouble supporting myself so found myself job-hunting once again. I sewed jeans and made pizza. What I learned in the league turned out to be very useful—and it was free. I can cook and I do all that now." Today Barbara works at a local pizza restaurant. She and her former League of Women colleagues meet regularly to exchange clothes and food at a local organizational branch, now moved from the regional party office to a rundown neighborhood on the fringes of the city that was once an industrial center of central Poland. As the status of the organization deteriorated after 1989, Barbara, like other former women's rights activists, felt that her work for women was devalued by both the new democratic liberal state and the newly emerged women's organizations.

#### **CONCLUSIONS: FEMINISM, TRANSFORMATION, AND BROKEN GENEALOGIES OF EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS**

Amid economic transformations and political turmoil in Eastern Europe, the rights of women have been reconsidered and spelled out through legal changes, state policies, and newly emerged feminist discourses. But outdated state definitions of traditional gender roles and gender

relations, along with the legacies of women's activism, have continued to shape political culture and women's agency. Over the last twenty-five years, activists in post-socialist states have been mobilizing against various hegemonic discourses that emerged or reemerged during the transitions, including those of neoliberalism, religious fundamentalism, nationalism, and racism. Women from the region also responded swiftly to hardships that materialized with the transition from a centrally planned economy, the dismantling of public services, and the abandonment of notions of equal participation between women and men in politics or labor markets.

Yet while feminist scholars and activists in the region largely acknowledge that the demise of the welfare state and social provisions after 1989 had a rather negative impact on women, they rarely consider the advances provided by the period of state socialism as a part of the trajectory of women's movements in the region. Although scholars admit that throughout the Eastern bloc and across the Soviet Union the numbers of women in the workforce and the rhetoric of constitutions and laws suggested that gender equality was a (partially fulfilled) goal of socialism, they often did not associate that with women's agency, making a silent assumption that Western-style democracy is a precondition for the emergence of women's agency. As a result, the history of women who worked within the state-socialist framework has frequently been rendered invisible.

In light of the changing political landscape, locally and transnationally, the economic crisis, reemergence of nationalisms, neoconservatism, religious fundamentalisms, and the backlash against women's rights around the world, it is important to (re)turn to analyzing state-socialist women's activism, which could be framed as an indispensable thread between the so-called First and Second Wave of women's movements, locally and transnationally.

Using the phrases "feminism" and "women's activism" to describe women's political engagements in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc is, of course, fraught with complications. The analyses of the women's mobilizations for women's rights in other locations presume grassroots mobilization and democratic political structures that were absent or minimal in the context of state-socialism. Additionally, when talking to former activists, available narrative frameworks of Western-style feminism often dominate descriptions of actions and mindsets. When

I ask Halina if she is a feminist, she doesn't hesitate. "But of course I am!" she declares, but notes that during "her times" this word was not in use. Alvina concurs: "I am a feminist, because my whole life I worked for women. I think women carry a very heavy burden since birth." Julia argues that she "discovered feminism" after the collapse of the Soviet Union. "During the Soviet period, feminists such as Alexandra Kollontai or Inessa Armand were represented not as feminists, but as extraordinary women. I started to discover feminism after the war [she is referring to the Abkhaz War in 1993] when women experienced a 'triple burden.'" Irina, however, a former member of the *zhensoviet*, has opposing views. "Feminist?" she asks, "I don't know what that means. I am for normal relationships between women and men." Similarly Danuta, the former head of the League of Women's section in a small town in western Poland, distances herself from the label: "No, we are not feminists, we do not discriminate against men. We have men as members, and their work is important."

The socialist state surely denied women equal rights in numerous ways. Barbara, who worked as a quality control manager in a paint factory, claims she had to struggle with a number of inequalities in her workplace: "I'm a woman in a male profession and . . . anytime there was a raise I was overlooked. My boss had to go to the manager of the factory. It was because I was a woman. They couldn't stand that I was a woman and that I was able to do what my [male] colleagues did." Halina, too, offers a complex analysis on the interplay between the formal equality and hidden discrimination that was evident under state socialism. Her response is to borrow from contemporary feminist analysis:

In my case, I cannot talk about discrimination. I had a career, I worked, and I had high-ranking positions. But if you ask me about unequal treatment, I've experienced it throughout my whole life. Even when I was in a very high position I couldn't make something happen because I had a man as a partner and I had to give in to him. If there were twenty men at a meeting, I had to be more intelligent when reporting issues than any of the men that were in the room. This happened all the time.

Others however argue that they never experienced unequal treatment during the era of state socialism. Ewa, a seventy-nine-year-old woman from Łódź, states her case in no uncertain terms: "There was

no discrimination! Where I worked there were a lot of women, and if the manager didn't follow them they would kill him." As they believe that state socialism was "good for women," many pre-1990s female activists perceive the transformation as a form of backlash against women's rights and social justice. The narrative of Janina, a lawyer and activist, substantiates the fact that socialist attachments were deeply meaningful to these women: "This time period is the most important to me, this was a time period when I achieved everything," she states. While women in both in Poland and Georgia expressed some degree of nostalgia toward aspects of the socialist reality, "Everybody had a job" was probably the most common statement I heard while conducting interviews. Some women, like Julia, added, "Women had work, and we were sure that we would not be hungry. We knew that we would work and after that, once we were old, we would have pensions and healthcare and that we would not slip under the poverty line." Others, like Barbara, did not shy away from making broader political statements. "There was more social justice then," she argues. Wiesława sees transformation as a waste of human and material resources:

I feel most sorry that the factories were just destroyed. I was working in a textile factory and it employed 1,200 people and produced 16,000 meters of wool textile that was all sold abroad. And then all of a sudden they were saying that it wasn't cost effective. The factory was knocked down and nothing replaced it: the people were fired and now they have no jobs.

Women working in the textile industry often emphasize that it was their industries that were hit hardest during the transition, while workers employed in "strategic" industries such as coal mining — mostly men — were looked after by the new political elite. Ewa states, "The transformation was a process of ruining everything. People were let go. Men in Zagłębie [a coal-mining region of Poland], of course, were compensated for that, but women who worked in the textile factories, women who worked three shifts, they didn't get anything." In Georgia the armed conflict that affected women and men differently is often seen as traumatic transformation. "Women carried the heaviest burden of transformation," says Julia. "After the war," she continues, "women took all responsibilities into their hands, they worked professionally, at home, and on top of that they had to take care of the men who felt, after the war, excluded by

society, with many of them finding solace in drink. So for women it was not a double but a triple burden and they had to find ways to deal with it.”

Yet, while state-socialist women’s attitudes toward feminism, discrimination, and transformation vary, the female activism that emerged in Poland and in post-Soviet states after 1989 almost unanimously rejected the previous system because the women’s organizations founded after the fall of the Berlin Wall, at least initially, sided with the mainstream conceptualizations of the post-socialist transformations as a process of returning to normality after the short-term, failed experiment of state socialism. The post-1989 turn toward the West shaped feminist knowledge production and activism since it built on the mainstream desire to “return to Europe” and fed off the idea that Second Wave, Western and, in particular, US feminism, should become the template of any feminist mobilizing. The turn to a “foreign” genealogy, which was built on the resentment of the socialist past, was also a strategy, as activist Sławomira Walczewska explains: “On one hand,” she argues, “there was a need to articulate oneself, on the other we had to separate ourselves from the representation of feminism as a re-growing head of [the] Hydra of Marxism.”<sup>31</sup>

But as long as the period of state socialism is taken for granted as a time during which women’s activism did not exist, it will remain unexamined in terms of the impact it had on feminist strategies and agendas. A new conceptualization of women’s agency under authoritarian regimes that 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 national, regional, and supranational levels can help construct alternative views on genealogies of women’s movements in post-state socialist countries, by illuminating how local legacies of gender equality intersected with the arrival of global, supranational gender discourses after the fall of state-socialism. Moreover, the recognition of the socialist-state period as an era involving a multilayered web of interactions helps destabilize the existing paradigm that understands the relationship between state socialism and post-socialist-state gender relationships in terms of disruption

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31. Sławomira Walczewska, “Jaki feminizm, czyli dokąd idzie Marianna?” [What kind of feminism, or where is Marianne heading?], *Pełnym Głosem* 5 (1997): 53.

and discontinuity. Rather, reconsidering pre-1989 emancipation projects can contribute to the delineation of the links and connections between socialist-state gender equality and gender aspects of the transformation processes. And, finally, such an approach can broaden the definition of the transnational women's movement and expand the dominant understanding of the genealogies of gender equality discourse. Acknowledging and understanding 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 can help overcome the enduring tendency to evaluate Eastern European feminisms solely in relationship to the West.