# Gender Inequality in the Communist Period

## Introduction

Back in the days and era of communism in Europe, women were degraded and treated with contempt as they were regarded as inferior beings. The communist theory did not recognize religion thus had illegitimate it. This move resulted in institutions such as marriage not be viewed as a sacred union as it is held as per belief leading to it being a mechanism that was used for women oppression by the capitalists. For instance, in countries such as Russia, the legislative arm of the government was formed in the year 1918. Its core objective was to ensure that the two institutions, family, and marriage, were destabilised in such a way that the society was integrated to focus on the state and not the family. Thus, the church was ripped off its capability to conduct marriage with the government gaining the full powers of performing the marriage ceremonies. Russia’s legislative principles rooted in marriage equality but made no effort to see it being practiced (Einhorn, 1993). Through published works and narratives, the scenario was the same in countries all over Europe. Women in countries such as East Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Kosovo, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, Latvia and many more, were mistreated during the communist period. They were regarded to be nothing but personal slaves whose places were to stay in the kitchen and do household chores. This way of life led to there being activists and feminists who begun fighting for women rights and equality. Governments in the above countries had to conform and change their perception of women. Laws were put in place to ensure that women would be able to vote, hold same job titles as men and at the same time be respected as men were at the given time. However, over the years there has been a contention regarding whether these so-called equality rights were achieved in the communist era. Therefore, this article will discuss on the disagreement that was present in the matter regarding gender equality using five countries from Europe as examples.

## Analysis

As it has been introduced in the above paragraph, the Communist period was characterised by principles that supported gender equality which according to studies done was not the case. The leading indicator that the gender equality that Communism had been said to have brought did not exist is how the inequalities between males and females seemed to grow after its collapse (Penn and Massino, 2009). Before this paper discusses on that, it will first aim in illustrating the real situation and conditions, in the form of inequalities, that women in different countries in Europe were going through during the alleged time.

## Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, and Montenegro

The above four named countries had at one time been part of the formerly known Kingdom of Yugoslavia. According to Glenny (1996), Yugoslavia before its disintegration was a nation that had been formed after the First World War and was made up of Slovenes, Croats, and the Serbs. In the Communism era, women equality was being promoted, but it was not being practiced. The Yugoslavian government at the given time was undermining the freedom of women in the kingdom. As illustrated by Glenny in the text above, “*The Fall of Yugoslavia*,” the government would take pride in the strides they had taken in matters concerning equality between men and women but in the real sense it was making it hard for women to access certain essentials. The essentials discussed by Glenny included; cosmetics, strawberries, and coke.

In one’s eye, the things mentioned earlier might seem small or trivial, but they were things that women in the communism era valued. The government turned the access of the essentials into a political factor in which women could not easily access them (Hodson, Massey and Sekulic, 1994). Their inaccessibility led to these trivial commodities to become rather highly sought after and deeply valued. Products like tampons that women and girls in the present day take for granted were scarce in the Communism era thanks to the government holding or limiting their access. At that given time, tampons had become a luxury (Drakulic, 1993). Toilet papers and rolls were also limited making it hard for women to access them. This led to them resorting to other things such as newspapers, leaves and old clothes to be used in place of toilet papers and tampons. From that statement, it is quite easy for one to depict the degrading that women were forced to undergo at a time when equality was alleged to be inexistent. Women no longer had hygiene options and were thus not able to maintain body cleanliness as they should or expected.

Another illustration of the mistreatment and degrading of women in the communist era was that the government ensured that these women would not be able to access other commodities such as cosmetics. As it has already been established, the Communist claimed to be in full support of equality in both men and women. By this claim, the government took the request into its literal meaning. Women were not able to access cosmetics as it was only right in making them look or appear feminine which was wrong as they were supposed to be equal to men thus they should also look alike (The World Bank, 2012). The state in its claim argued that worrying about cosmetics was not part of its mandate as it had “bigger and better” things that it needed to sort out. Women were profoundly affected by these sad facts, and their self-esteems were severely affected (Drakulic, 1993).

All the women in Yugoslavia before the breakup shared the same fate under the Communist government. Gender equality also saw them not being allowed to lead as at that particular time majority of women were being demoted or fired for holding different values or views from what their male counterparts in the state-owned. The trivial things that the government kept on clarifying that it had no time to worry or associate itself with were all but just part of a political move to undermine and discriminate women. The women suffered in ways that they could not imagine (McRobbie, 2004). Equality still had them as the ones who were to take care and carry out household chores as the men worked. How could there have been equality if men perceived themselves superior and not liking to being associated with domestic duties?

## East Germany

Kranz (2005) wrote on the purported existence of a women’s lobby group in East Germany and what it was the fit thing for if at all it existed. Kranz begins by discussing on the alleged liberation and equality that women in East Germany had allegedly achieved. According to the author, the women in East Germany at the time of the Communists government had not been emancipated as people have been made to believe. Kranz, therefore, took time to further highlight on real lives that women led in the German society in contrast to the official policy that existed courtesy of the Communist state. The author then goes ahead to write, “(1) the realisation of legal equality between men and women, (2) the promotion of working women, and (3) special protection of mothers and children.4 To achieve these goals, the politicians followed diverse programs and ideas which were all based on socialist principles. The party’s policy toward women was divided into three phases” (Kranz, 2005).

From the above-given quote, it is quite clear for one to note the steps under which the government at the given time had taken to ensure that women were well cared for and that there was equality among the two genders. This move saw women being given job posts and positions in workplaces in a bid to facilitate compatibility among family life and work. It is important to note that women were indeed able to get hired and work the same jobs as the men did but it is quite impressive also to note that they did or not were able to attain any managerial positions (Harsch, 2007). One can easily distinguish the contrast in the previous sentence as women were allowed to work by a government that ensured they did not reach or gets any top managerial job. The Communist state was still not okay or supportive of the fact that a woman could be allowed to lead or be above male counterparts at their respective places of work (Alsop, 2000). This event is a clear indication of the hypocrisy that was being promulgated by the Communists supporters. As it was with Yugoslavia as earlier illustrated in this paper, women in East Germany were allowed employment at the end of it all they solely bore the burden having to handle housework and chores all alone as the old known perspective of women belonging to the kitchen persisted.

Other than the above-discussed discrepancies, women were also passed forward as unworthy leaders in the political sphere (Pen & Massino, 2009). Men viewed them as unfit to rule or hold any public office as they were said not to be able to make essential and impacting decisions. Women were not happy about how their male counterparts treated them, and this was the reason as to why women committees were formed (Pascall and Lewis, 2004). These committees pushed for equality among women and men at places of work and also in the political atmosphere (Busse and Spielmann, 2006). However, the communist government was not okay in the ways which the women committees worked and thus sort to control them. This was calculated move as it ended up treating the issues that the women raised as rhetoric that needed no special or any attention. One is can easily depict how women were therefore undermined and their voices suppressed by a regime that allegedly supported them and campaigned for their empowerment(Ponthieux and Meurs, 2015).

## Poland

Poland is also part of Europe, and it too was under the Communists rule. Poland stands out as it was able to find for the end of communism. They too were forced to adhere to the communist rule at that time with Karl Marx ideologies on gender equalities being as it was illustrated by Fidelis (2010). Over the whole communism era, laws on abortion, anti-abortion, and women right to work were passed and at the same time abolished depending on the leader that was in power at a given time (Korolczuk and Saxonberg, 2015). Women had been given the right to be employed same as men and work in the same environment and conditions. However, just like it was with the other countries under Communism rule that this paper has discussed, it is important to note that with gender equality claims and support that the government was in favour of, women were still not given top managerial post which was a pure case of irony. Other than this, the abortion laws were being passed and abolished consequently without the women having a voice about the matter.

This scenario shows how wrong the Communism form of rule was as it went ahead to make laws and regulations that directly affected women, but they had no voice in the matter (Kenney, 1999). This was a clear indication on the undermining and discrimination of women as they were given the same jobs like the ones men were doing but at the same time, their voices had been suppressed when it came to important issues such as abortion (Mazurek, 2013). The jobs that the women in Poland had the luxury of having been however not in the same wage bracket as those done by men. Gender segregation at workplaces was quite rampant, and the women earned minimal wages with almost 35% difference to that received by their male counterparts. Women were also suppressed in the political arena. Men did not give them a chance to become leaders or have any political affiliations. This was wrong owed to the fact that everything in the country was supposed to be fifty-fifty chance for both genders, male and female (Hallas, 1994).

## Further Analysis

According to experts, women were only allowed to work as it was another way for the government to earn more tax from families provided that both adults were coming (Verdery, 1996). Marx and Stalin were main pushers for Communism kind of rule. Communism rooted for governments to ensure that every citizen was working to gain tax and revenue from them. It was a way in which countries could enrich themselves by passing ideologies to their people that the betterment of the country was their first and sole duty (Dorius and Firebaugh, 2010). However, instead of genuinely giving equal opportunities to both sides of the divide, women were undermined and discriminated against.

However, the end of the Communism era came with its disadvantages that women became more affected than they were at the time of the rule (Acker, 2006). End of the said era saw women lose their jobs and those that had hopes of being employed not able to land any form of employment. Things became harder, and women were more degraded than before. It is important to note that if at all the Communist regimes respected women and had given them the amount same of respect and opportunities given to men, then they would not have been affected so severely after its collapse. The governments had been using women as tools to earn revenue instead of as part of its essential and relied on demography as (Fidelis, 2010). As recorded by Donna Harsch in her book, “*Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic,*” women in East Germany became tired and outraged from how they were being treated at the given time. This led to strikes and demonstrations were carried out in the streets of Germany to show their contempt for the Communism government (Harsch, 2007). This was also the same situation that women in Hungary were going through in the awful communist era. With the women in Hungary, things were a bit harder for them as they were employed and given work as dictated by the Communism governments but some of them were at times not paid for the work that they did (Corrin, 1994). Family ideologies were suppressed as it had been the case with the other East Europe countries.

As earlier discussed, the issue regarding abortion was one that was present all over East and Central Europe. For instance, it was legal in East Germany but illegal in West Germany. It was a political matter which it is important to note that women should have been allowed to speak or have a say regarding the issue (Gal & Kligman, 2000). Instead the governments in the respective countries took it upon themselves to decide whether it was right or wrong. It is also imperative to note that the two different stands regarding abortion that East and West Germany held almost sabotaged their unification. Further on in the text, Kligman and Gal illustrate on the conflicts that were present due to the issue pertaining children sired through rape during the war. These children were viewed as seeds of sin and thus not recognized by their respective ethnic groups. This was wrong owed to the fact that it was a form of inequality as the men were responsible for the birth of the children and the women were the ones that had to bear the heavy burden of hate and contempt (Gal & Kligman, 2000).

## Counterarguments

Despite the existence of several factors leading to inequalities and oppression of women in the communist era, some states had established efforts to try and promote the rights of women in the society. For instance, East Germany, girls did not have a readily access to formal education, and most of them went to only upper and middle classes. The rest period would be spent learning housekeeping and farming skills and then merge into the labor population. However, this changed, when the government and universities allowed the girls to further their education. After this, the nation produced the first woman graduate, Anita Augspurg, who graduated from University of Zurich with a Law degree (Guido, 2010). The institution opened more doors for German women, until in 1909, when the government fully allowed admission of girls into higher education levels. This indicated the government's efforts toward promoting equality between both genders, by allowing women to access education, which was previously perceived as men’s package. Therefore, regardless of such challenges, he administration tried to reduce the inequality gap between the two sexes.

Additionally, in Croatia, women were not allowed to engage in the voting process. This privilege was delegated to men, denying the feminine gender the right to determine the leaders. However, as more individuals and influential leaders pushed for inclusion of women in the process, the administration resolved to adhere to their requests in 1945. Hence, they were allowed to participate in the electoral process (Balošić, 2014). This indicated a big move toward the realization of equality and the promotion of the feminises, and their influence in the Croatian political movement. Therefore, it can be said that the administration had tried to enhance equality between men and women by giving them equal chances to determine the leaders to manage the nation and guide on the allocation of the country’s resources.

## Conclusion

From all that has been discussed above, it is important to note that in as much as the governments above were pushing for equalities among their citizens; they failed miserably in ensuring that women were well treated. Women’s not being allowed to hold managerial positions or be able to stand up and fight for their rights was wrong (Augustine, 2010). Those that worked but not paid were treated in the most inhumane way possible. It was wrong for someone to work and do their work diligently only not to be allowed wages at the end of the week/month. Gender equality could only have been said to be fully functional had the women been allowed to explore the same kind of opportunities that their male counterparts seemed to enjoy. An equal amount of wages should also have been present to motivate the women to work properly. In places like old Yugoslavia, the Communism government should have ensured that women were able to access necessities that they were not allowed to have at the specific time in history.

It was wrong of women not being allowed to access tampons and toilet paper rolls. This is something that should never have been allowed take place. If in the first-place family as an institution had been recognised and respected, then the importance of women would also have been appreciated. Stripping the church of the powers to perform marriage ceremonies by some of the Communist governments was wrong as the church had a closer relationship with the people than the state had. The authoritarian form of rule was the main reason as to why Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union failed as people became tired and were no longer able to withstand the forceful leadership that was being imposed on them (Scot, 1976). Therefore, had Communism been able to value, respect and promote most essential institutions and human needs, then it would have successful until the present day as it is with present-day China.

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