



This slogan embraces a tendency prevalent throughout the conference: to think across topics and to create alliances not only between countries, but also between actors working in different fields. It also highlights a question that came up at various times: “should specific women’s questions be discussed separately or as part of a wider group of challenges in a time of great socio-political changes?” And there were many different answers to this question. On the one hand,

there was the worry that women’s issues get side-lined in times of transitions: “during the big changes, we immediately forget feminist issues. This happened in the 60s: the big problem was the problem of power. In upheavals, one doesn’t consider the feminist position because other questions of power come to the foreground: the relations between black and white, poor and rich, but not man and woman. There is always a competition between the different structures of power.”

“I WOULD BE HAPPY TO JOIN THE GENDER ISSUE, BUT I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT NOW TO FIGHT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT.” CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM CZECH REPUBLIC

The gender discussion at the conference embraced many different topics. Here, the focus will be on the following three: the discussion of women’s lives under Communism, the discussion of what happened to women after the transitions, and the discussion of what is going on today.

What was the position of women under Communism? This question led to many different perspectives. There was the observation that in the CSSR, “women were proud that socialism helped them go out of the victim position; they could study, work. That was told to us by these old women who were interviewed. Socialism gave more to women than to men.” Someone added: “in the GDR, women had a lot: childcare,

work. There was even the legal preferential treatment of women: in the case of divorce or separation, the kids and apartment would go to the women.” And: “In the GDR, I worked in science. I needed only to say: I’m ready and they would give me work. After ‘89, I would be told that I had a husband and a home. I learned to deal with it.”

But there was also the theme of a disconnect between a “proclaimed equality between men and women” and a reality, in which women were shouldering the double burden of paid work and unpaid care-work. There was a lack of discussion of who did the care-work. The idea of women as the “avantgarde of the East”, someone else stated, served to romanticize what was often a very difficult life. “My mother had no time to sleep,” someone from the Czech Republic described. And there was also the recognition that there was a lack of support for “alternative lifestyles”: “the single mom position was much more difficult,” someone from the Czech Republic stated. And someone from the GDR: “what did not find any consideration were other kinds of living: women without children, lesbian women, a woman who had fallen in love with a man from Armenia; this diversity wasn’t at all considered.”

Another focus was on the discussion of the role of women during and after the transition. Did women have a specific role in the processes of change and did they manage to retain it? "In CSSR, after the transition, women did not have a specific role. Everyone thought that freedom and democracy would be enough. During socialism, women had a role in the group: there were intellectual women, workers, ... so no, the question of women was not very important during the transition." Someone from Russia concurred: "Women's interests were seen as secondary issues. Even today, nobody thinks that it's part of the democratic process to talk about women's issues." "In Russia, after the '90, the strategy is to be a mother." And someone from Poland stated: "In Poland, we tried everything for the benefit of women: bills on gender equality and so on. They all failed. What made a difference was Poland's joining the EU."

There was a strong sense that women who had been previously active during the transitions retreated from the public sphere. Why was this so? There were two sets of answers: first, "women were tired." "When I look back 30 years ago, I was tired for this struggle of power in the New Forum." "In Poland, after '89: women left politics. Why? They had achieved their goals and wanted to leave space for colleagues. They also said they didn't want to go against the Church and their fellow dissenters." But there was also another explanation: that there were systemic reasons for women's withdrawal from the public sphere: "It was a consequence of reunification.

In the GDR women's factories were closed and women's infrastructure was organised through work. When work fell away, isolation happened. The structures to resist and to communicate broke away. It took a while for new structures to form. Without work, there was no childcare...all this was understood as personal failure." In the Czech Republic, "the government had the idea: we will hide the unemployment if we give maternity leave of up to 4 years." And also from the Czech Republic: "conservative men entered politics and declared 'the freedom to be a housewife.' Many institutions such as childcare closed." And someone from Poland mentions the situation today: "Now I am very worried that women are given money for children; now they will withdraw from the labour market. But I also understand: a lot of work is not exciting. I understand this decision, but it will have consequences in the future."

The way in which after the transition, patriarchal structures solidified and conservative forces took root was an important theme. And the question: what can we do about it? Many suggestions were small-scale solutions: for instance, the idea of job sharing that would make it easier for women to assume positions of power. The importance of childcare was emphasized and the importance of examples of women that hold high positions in society. But there was also another debate on whether if women were to hold positions of power, they'd do things differently. And here, one conclusion was that the structures of power would not make it possible for women to act differently. As one participant put it, "it's not the case that women are any better humans. There are a lot of women on the right. Margaret Thatcher

cut down on all social benefits. When we talk about 'women power,' we have to distinguish it from patriarchal structures. There are a lot of women that have found a very cosy place within patriarchy and that benefit from it enormously. So we as women have to think about what kind of structures we want, what kind of work, what kind of economics, ... We need a different system that takes care of creation, of dignity, of equality. These are feminist structures for me."

The discussion of gender thus wove together past (the situation of women before and during the transition) and present and offered a very complex picture of what happened back then and what is happening today. It also championed the importance of individual voices and individual experiences and highlighted how different these experiences can be – between countries and between generations, but also within countries and generations.