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LACKING OR MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: THE CASE OF CZECH RURAL WOMEN

Abstract

The socio-economic situation of Czech rural women underwent change after the end of World War II in 1945. Women's employment was traditionally high in Czechoslovakia, both in agriculture and in other sectors of the national economy. Before the collectivisation of agriculture (prior to 1949), women used to work in private farm households in the same way as men. The traditional division of labour assigned to women was mainly manual labour in plant and animal production. Simultaneously, they carried out household chores, were responsible for childcare as well as caring for elderly parents and relatives. Their involvement in village public or political life was, for many reasons, very low. The female role lay in sustaining family stability; outside activities were mainly reserved to men. Women took part in church life, cultural and charity activities, to a lesser extent in sports activities. Any higher economic or social ambitions were sure to clash with the limits of the local community and could only be fulfilled at the price of leaving the rural community – for bigger communes or towns.

Forceful collectivisation broke the traditional patterns of family life in private farming and approximated labour in agriculture to industrial labour and rural life to urban patterns. The employment level of rural women did not decrease. Work in agriculture had its positive and negative features. It supplied women with employment where they lived or close by, incomes were – for that time – relatively good, there were possibilities of changing shifts and certain social advantages (sending children to nursery schools, kindergartens and children's summer camps, also catering for family members, recreation etc.). Women's incomes have always been lower than men's, but women had a higher illness rate (including nursing of ill children) and, on average, also lower qualifications. The division of labour into male (qualified, technologically demanding) and female (physically demanding, with a high share of manual labour) persisted.

The changes after 1989 profoundly transformed village economic and social life. Privatisation and the subsequent transformation of agricultural enterprises contributed considerably to the decrease of the labour force in agriculture. Finding and keeping a job in rural areas is currently very difficult (in agriculture as well as outside it). The article ana-

lyses, based on empirical data, the present socio-economic situation of women in Czech rural areas.

Keywords: Czech rural areas, rural women, employment, household, public life.

INTRODUCTION

Do rural women nowadays live in a considerably different way than their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers? If we compare their economic situation, the accessibility and level of education, equipment of rural households, the scope and way of spending their free time and other attributes of the present style of living, then the answer has to be positive. The position of rural women has changed considerably in the last hundred years. The changes were gradual and were connected with the main political and economic milestones – the agrarian crisis at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th. century, World War I., the origin of the Czechoslovak Republic, the crisis of the 30ies, World War II., collectivisation, the Soviet occupation in 1968, the “normalisation” of the 70ies and political changes after 1989. The post-transformation period of the last ten years can be viewed as a certain re-capitulation of the positives and negatives of this relatively multicoloured historical past.

The difficulties and hardship of each period – the agrarian crisis, when men-providers sought jobs outside the home, sometimes in distant countries and overseas, hunger and privation during World War I., when men were at war – were reflected in the lives of rural women. After the origin of Czechoslovakia, the sharp social differentiation of the Czech countryside was mitigated and the land reform strengthened the middle farmer stratum.

Women’s employment was traditionally relatively high in Czechoslovakia, both in agriculture and in other sectors of the national economy. The traditional division of agricultural labour allocated to women mainly manual labour in plant and animal production. Simultaneously, they provided for the functioning of the household, child care and care for old parents. Their involvement in village public or political life was for many reasons very low. The female role consisted of sustaining the stability of the family and outside activities were rather reserved for men.

Forceful collectivisation after 1949 broke the traditional patterns of family life on private farms and approximated labour in agriculture to industrial labour and rural life to urban patterns. Employment of rural women did not decrease and this had both positive and negative aspects for women. It supplied jobs for them where they lived or close by, relatively good incomes, the possibility of changing shifts and certain social advantages (places for their children in nursery schools, kindergartens and children’s camps, also catering for family members, recreation or-

ganised by the enterprise etc.). Women's incomes were always worse than men's, but women had a higher illness rate (including taking care of ill children) and on average lower qualifications than men. The division of labour into male (qualified, technologically demanding) and female ones (physically demanding, with a high share of manual labour) also persisted in socialist large-scale agriculture.

The 1970's and 1980's rather strengthened these trends in women's employment. Women's higher socio-economic ambitions were curbed by local community limits and usually could only be fulfilled by leaving the community – for bigger communes or towns. Part of the qualified youth left the village after finishing their studies and settled elsewhere; young women followed their husbands. The town and bigger communes offered more opportunities for both men and women (Majerová, 1989).

After 1989, village economic and social life changed considerably. Privatisation and the transformation of agricultural enterprises contributed considerably to the decrease in labour force in agriculture. Finding and keeping a suitable job in rural areas (both in agriculture and outside it) is difficult for women. On the other hand, a number of opportunities for all social groups have opened. Economic conditions, life-style and the social climate of Czech villages are gradually changing (Majerová, 1992).

After the experience of the past ten years can the position of rural women in the Czech Republic be considered equal when comparing it to the men's position? Do Czech women belong among the endangered social groups or do they simply not utilise the opportunities? Do positive aspects prevail over negative ones in their everyday lives or is the situation deteriorating for them?

EMPLOYMENT OF RURAL WOMEN

The Labour Code Amendment orders the observation of equal labour opportunities. Employers are required to ensure equal treatment of all employees and specifically to observe equal opportunities regarding gender. This means an assurance of equal opportunities for men and women regarding labour conditions, career, qualification improvement and the same payment for the same labour. At the same time, discrimination in legal labour relations is prohibited. However, practice tends to be slightly different.

In the period between the end of WW II and November 1989, the labour market was practically non-existent. Every adult citizen, who was able to work was obliged to do so or else s/he would have been labelled a parasite. Women on maternity leave and women in the household were the only exception to this rule. The move of labour force still existed, however, and it could be characterised as follows:

1. It was highly segregated with regard to whether it included men or women.

2. It was strictly separated from the relation performance/wage (i.e. wages were not sufficiently dependent on labour performance)

3. It was segmented with regard to the production or non-production sector.

4. Moreover, all the mentioned phenomena overlapped and combined.¹

The inequalities in the labour system before 1989 disqualified women. Despite all the proclamations on the equality of men and women in society, men dominated in the labour system. Employment of rural women did not differ from these general trends. However, it issued from rather different specifics – decentralisation of rural inhabitancy, worse equipment of rural communes, the type of living in family houses or agricultural farms with gardens and subsistence farms, the lack of labour opportunities, more difficult conditions for the functioning of public and social organisations, a traditional approach to the division of social roles in the family and household.

Employment of rural women both in agriculture and outside it in the commune or nearby allowed for fulfilment of employment as well as family obligations. The income of women was an important part of the family budget. Besides their paid jobs, they carried out a big proportion of household chores and subsistence farming. Care for pre-school children was provided either by pre-school institutions (nursery schools, kindergartens, school clubs, children's summer camps) or care was – more or less – provided by grandparents.

This model of the working participation of women both in employment and in the household was also partially followed after 1989. However, there are certain changes, which are not very positive for women. The transformation of agricultural as well as non-agricultural enterprises means a considerable increase in labour productivity, reduction of jobs, demands on the labour force qualification, full exploitation of working time and the necessity to conform to the employer's demands (regarding time, space, personal etc.). For women, this means the necessity of greater qualifications or re-training, a greater threat of unemployment, limited career prospects influenced by family obligations, income discrimination, low participation in management and organisational positions.

Rural areas show a relatively higher unemployment rate, affecting women in particular. Commuting to more distant places is difficult for them due to family obligations, reduced train and bus connections as well as the high financial demands when using their own transport. Labour in agriculture has – besides the advantages of the proximity of the abode and working place – many disadvantages for women: physical demands, endangered by accidents and labour illnesses, bad hygienic conditions, the impact of weather, time regimes harmonised to the sea-

¹ Marie Čermáková, Hana Hašková, Alena Křížková, Marcela Linková, Hana Maříková, Martina Musilová, *Souvislosti a změny genderových diferenciací v české společnosti v 90. letech* (Relations and changes of gender differentiation in Czech society in the 90's), Institute of Sociology AS, Prague 2000.

sonal peaks in plant production and the demands of caring for animals in animal production etc. (Majerová, 1989).

Employment of the rural population outside agriculture is very differentiated, ranging from highly qualified jobs (teachers, medical doctors, researchers, managers, artists, computer operators) to medium qualified jobs and quite non-qualified job opportunities. Rural women, if not already retired or staying at home, prevail among the medium and less qualified employed. If they are in business, it is generally as private entrepreneurs without employees.

The most usual branches of business are home trade, education, food industry, textile industry, other industry, communal services, health care, housing and catering services, state administration etc. Women prevail among ordinary workers; men prevail in all levels of management. Women are very rarely represented in senior management.

The reasons why women work, even if their possibilities of participating are less favourable than men's, have not changed very much since 1989. After 1989 some people expected that the majority of women with pre-school children would stay at home. However, this did not correspond to the situation on the labour market, where unemployment and different changes influenced both men and women. The income of women is still important as a contribution to the family budget, women like being with people, they try to making savings for their old age and help their children, they want to be independent and have their own professional lives. In the village, there is also the relationship to working in nature, the relationship to animals, ties to the rural commune, its history and traditions. Being able to cope with both employment and the household, the garden, processing one's own products and their conservation – all this is perceived as being a good housewife and taking care of the family. Success in the home sometimes compensates for the unequal position of women in employment, where they may be willing to work for a lower wage or in worse conditions than men. The career of a successful rural housewife is (in middle and older age categories) perceived as equivalent to a professional career. However, despite the possibility of professional success, women prefer starting a family and subsequently caring for children. It is, however, impossible to discern, when the preference of successful household management is a primary or a substitute goal.

RURAL WOMEN AND THEIR HOUSEHOLDS

The two-career model of partner co-operation is not very common in Czech villages. It is expected, and practice among the middle-aged and older generation corresponds to it, that women resign from their careers and take care of their families and households. Opinions of the present younger generation of women

differ, since current possibilities of education, travelling and doing business are much wider than those their mothers and grandmothers knew. However, enterprising and educated rural girls do not usually stay in the village but look for partners outside the commune. The implementation of a model other than the traditional family model is thus easier for them.

However, in a typical rural household a considerable number of household chores are carried out by both men and women. In villages, private housing facilities have gradually improved so that nowadays rural households are on average comparable to urban ones, as regards heating, water supply, sewage as well as furniture and household equipment.

Equipment for production and processing of agricultural products is common, i.e. small tractors, other small technology, freezers, fruit dryers, home smoking units etc. Due to the lack of services in the village, most maintenance and repairs connected with the car, house, flat and household are done by self-help, so that home workshops and different types of household equipment such as sewing machines, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, washers, washing presses belong to the common equipment. The equipment is considerably differentiated according to age groups. Rural households of the younger and middle-aged generation are more often equipped for sport, entertainment and hobbies. The number of PCs is increasing; by 2000 they were owned by around 15% of rural households and about 60% had phones – both stationary and mobile. It can be assumed, that these percentages have grown considerably during the last three years. The typical equipment of an average rural household includes: refrigerator, freezer, automatic washing machine, radio, TV, tape recorder, car, bicycle, electrical appliances (cooker, mixer, robot etc.) and telephone.

A rather obvious division of male and female chores can be discerned as regards the division of labour in the household. Men usually provide maintenance and repairs of the car and home, as well as gardening and subsistence farming; women's responsibilities involve shopping, cooking, maintenance and repairs of clothing, cleaning of the flat and care for children and the old and ill family members. Compared to the previous generation, the number of female drivers has increased, even if the care for car and other transport remains the responsibility of men.

A rather considerable burden is represented by cooking, which, however also belongs to the area of rural women's self-realisation. Traditional Czech cuisine is laborious and time consuming. There is a prevalence of complicated meat processing (roasting, stewing, frying, grilling etc.), preparation of different types of gravies and cereal dishes (e.g. dumplings and noodles) among favourite dishes; fruit dumplings and different kinds of vegetables. Pies, cakes, turnovers, sweets and different pastries are baked at home. The popularity of quick-fried steaks with fresh vegetables and ready-made meals is not very high in villages, people mainly process and consume their own household produce. Discussions regarding meals

(preparation, exchange of recipes) belong to frequent conversation topics of rural women, particularly middle and older age categories.

PUBLIC AND SOCIAL LIFE OF RURAL WOMEN

The inequality in the economic as well as social position of men and women in Czech rural society does exist, but opinions regarding it can be labelled ambivalent. On the one hand, both genders acknowledge, that the differences in opportunities (both in labour and public life) do exist; the abilities and qualifications of women are not a priori doubted. On the other hand, men underline their "male" role in the family as well as in public and appreciate, if women do the household chores and male participation in them is not demanded (with the exception of work they regard as their hobbies). However, similar opinions are also held by women, they are interested in using their qualifications and professional career, but defend their "female" role in the family. It is, however, difficult to harmonise a professional career and housework. Nevertheless, the generation shift in perceiving the male and female role in job and household is obvious.

Women's participation in public and social life is equally contradictory. There is no doubt about their important role in the formation of social attitudes. However, in organisational structures women are seen mainly among members but not in management, if they are not exclusively women's organisations and clubs. There is partially the same effect as in the professional career – less free time and lower interest in the career. The reason may be the more difficult entry into male organisational structures than the lower interest of women.

The trend is even more obvious in political life. The rural population is in general less politically engaged than the urban population. This does not mean, however, that it has not got its own clear-cut political opinions and attitudes, which are expressed at elections. Engagement in political life is low, however, and women are included on a small scale. Political representation of the interests of countryside and agriculture has been practically non-existent since 1989. In the European and world context, there is also a noticeable absence of rural women's organisations in the Czech Republic, which would have a more pronounced political and social influence.

CONCLUSION

The working and living conditions of rural women in the Czech Republic experienced a number of changes after 1989, which are perceived and evaluated in a different way, i.e. from the age, qualification and professional category point

of view. Twelve years of development brought about both positive and negative experiences. In the professional sphere, the older generation of rural women with lower qualifications is gradually retiring and further generations are more or less successfully adapting to open labour market demands. In family life there are changes in reproductive behaviour, which to a certain extent copy the trends apparent for several decades in west European society: the age of partners at their first marriage is increasing, the age of primiparae is also increasing, the share of alternatives to marriage and family, i.e. non-married couples, test-marriages, cohabitation of partners of the same sex, is growing, as well as the number of singles, i.e. of young people living alone without any intention of starting a family. All these trends naturally affect the cohabitation of men and women and partially, even if to a lesser extent, also affect the rural population.

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