

PRESS RELEASE

UNICEF report provides first comprehensive assessment of the situation of women after the collapse of communism. Inequality is increasing, report warns

Geneva, 22 September 1999 - Women are facing increasing inequality across the countries of Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, according to a new report from the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy.

While the report exposes communism's failure to promote a real culture of equality, it also acknowledges that the system produced some positive legacies for women. Heavy investment in basic social services meant that levels of educational achievement among women were high, standards of health care were good, women could expect employment, and comprehensive state childcare allowed them to earn money and raise families. Even a decade after the transition process began, the gap between men and women in terms of human development is smaller than in many other countries with similar levels of national wealth.

These gains are now under threat, warns UNICEF. The political transformation promised by transition is building upon, rather than levelling existing inequalities. Women across the region are facing higher unemployment and lower real income than men, reductions in childcare, increasing violence and deteriorating health. Indeed, the report suggests that with national autonomy restored and cultural traditions revived, a re-emergence of pre-communist patriarchal values is threatening to stifle the voices of women rather than liberate them.

UNICEF has been monitoring the impact of economic transition on children in the countries of the region on a regular basis since 1992. This latest report, *Women in Transition*, provides the first comprehensive assessment of the situation of women in Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltics since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It is issued on the 20th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which has been ratified by all 27 countries in the region.

A mixed picture emerges from the data presented in the report. The upheavals of social and economic change are affecting the region's 200 million women and girls both positively and negatively. However, one thing is clear:

fundamentally sexist values hold sway. By taking the lid off the past, the transition has exposed the dramatic failure of the communist system to promote a lasting culture of real sexual equality.

In the political arena, for example, the thin veneer of equality imposed by communism was quickly swept aside. Women accounted for 31 per cent of parliamentarians in the Soviet Union in 1984. This figure suggested that women were as well represented as in the Nordic countries, albeit in a parliament that held no real power. In the 1989 elections, quotas were partially lifted, and the share of women deputies halved, falling to 16 per cent. Today, the average percentage across the Baltic and CIS countries is less than 10 per cent, ranging from 1 per cent in Kyrgyzstan to 18 per cent in Turkmenistan.

The report also demonstrates that women suffered under a double burden of work and childcare, for equality in employment opportunities was never matched by greater sharing of family responsibilities between men and women. Data shows that the total workload of women in Central and Eastern Europe averaged close to 70 hours per week - about 15 hours more per week than that of women in Western Europe. This trend has continued during the transition.

Violence against women, including domestic violence, was more prevalent under communism than previously assumed. Worse still, it is now on the rise.

Women in the region have few escape routes from a violent home or from abuse in the work place. The economic crisis of transition has pushed many women into greater financial dependence on their partners and limited their job prospects. Shelters for victims of violence are rare and so over-stretched they often turn women away. And the shortage of housing has become so acute that it is common for couples to continue sharing the same home after their divorce.

A survey in Moscow showed that more than one in three divorced women had been beaten by their husbands. In Azerbaijan 26 per cent of women are the victims of domestic violence and one in four of those reported regular beatings.

Domestic violence is not prohibited by law in Armenia, Bulgaria or Georgia. Marital rape is not recognized as a crime in Albania, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Tajikistan, Ukraine or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In Azerbaijan no form of spousal abuse is recognized as criminal. In Slovenia, domestic violence is not considered criminal in cases of "light" injury - a definition which includes fractured nose, rib, light contusions and punched-out teeth.

The economic and social upheaval of the transition has also led to a rapid growth in the numbers of women involved in the sex industry. Trafficking in women for the purpose of forced prostitution has been increasing in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

But the newly emerging civil networks, which have been born out of the transition now, have a chance to break the silence surrounding sexual

exploitation and violence against women. The number of non-governmental organizations and associations established to address the issue is growing fast. These organizations have started setting up hotlines, crisis centres, shelters and legal aid centres in most countries of the region.

Overall, women in the region began the transition with relatively good health status and adequate access to basic health services. In most countries of the region, the inability of governments to generate sufficient revenue has taken a toll on the well-established state health care services of the communist era. But ironically the greatest threats to women's health are beginning to arise as a direct result of their greater freedom to engage in high risk behaviour such as drug use.

The impact of these emerging problems is exacerbated by an environment where there is often a lack of awareness or education to help address the issues. Until recently, adolescent girls in the region used tobacco and alcohol less than their counterparts in Western Europe and this mitigated against health problems such as lung cancer. Since the beginning of the transition however, the gap is narrowing. WHO expects rising tobacco use to be the single largest cause of increased disease and death in the region. In a more liberalized market place, the concerted targeting of young women in tobacco advertising is likely to play a pivotal role in the increase in smoking among women and girls.

The recent rise in HIV infections is also staggering. The number of cases recorded for men and women in the region jumped from about 30,000 in 1994 to 270,000 at the end of 1998. An estimated 80,000 infections occurred in 1998 alone. The biggest increases took place in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine.

The report concludes that women have much to gain from the transition. Indeed, the principles which underpin the abandonment of communism - the search for expression of diversity, genuine political representation, economic development and the expansion of choice - are the same principles that drive the movement for women's equality.

A concerted effort must now be made to place women's equality high on the political agenda, urges UNICEF. For if this opportunity is missed, the concrete advantages afforded to women through the communist system will be eroded before the foundations have been laid for an environment in which men and women can benefit equally from the freedom which accompanies the transition to democratic society.

Discrimination against women blocks the development of nations just as it blocks progress for girls, women and their families. Equality cannot be imposed as it was under communism, says UNICEF, but nor can it thrive in an unfettered marketplace.

Note to Editors:

The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, formally known as the UNICEF International Child Development Centre, is based in Florence, Italy.

Regional Monitoring Report No.6, Women in Transition, has been

produced by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in cooperation with UNICEF Offices in the CEE/CIS and Baltics. It has received financial support from the Government of Italy, the World Bank and UNICEF's Regional Office for the CEE/CIS and Baltics, based in Geneva.

The Regional Monitoring Report is published in English and Russian by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Piazza SS Annunziata 12, 50122 Florence, Italy. Fax + 39 055 244817; phone + 39 055 20330;
internet <http://www.unicef-icdc.org>;
e-mail: florence.orders@unicef.org
Price: US\$25.00.

TransMONEE Database

The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre produces the TransMONEE database –a stand-alone electronic database including a vast range of social and economic indicators collected during the compilation of the Regional Monitoring Report. The database allows the user to extract a profile of economic and social indicators for a single country or to compare a single indicator across sub-regions, countries and time-periods.

For More

Information contact

Patrick McCormick, Communications Officer: pmccormick@unicef.ch