Family policies and gender in Hungary, Poland, and Romania

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Abstract

This paper discusses changes and new directions in the gendered nature of the welfare state in three post-state socialist societies: Hungary, Poland and Romania. Relying on an analysis of laws and regulations passed after 1989 concerning child care, maternity and parental leave, family support, unemployment and labor market policies, retirement and abortion laws, the authors identify the differences and the similarities among the three countries, pointing out not only their status in 2001, but also their trajectory, the dynamics and timing of their change. The authors argue that there are essential differences between the three countries in terms of women’s relationship to the welfare state. They also specify some of the key historical and social variables which might explain variation across countries.

Introduction

Researchers have found a strong correlation between the character of the welfare state and class (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Korpi, 2000) and gender inequalities (O’Connor et al., 1999; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1996). In particular, the generosity of welfare benefits is highly consequential for women’s chances of becoming and/or staying poor (Casper et al., 1994; Christopher et al., 2000). Post-state socialist East-
ern European societies exhibit gender poverty gaps of varying sizes: women are over-represented in poverty in some, although not all societies in the region (Braithwaite et al., 2000, and see also articles by Fodor, Domanski and Popova in this issue). In this paper we seek to contribute to the explanation for this cross-national variation by analyzing the gendered content of some of the central components of the emerging welfare states: family, maternity, and child care policies.

In Eastern Europe, as in most known societies, women are the primary caretakers of children. As a result, state policies concerning child bearing and rearing are determined by, and are simultaneously highly consequential for, gender inequality and women’s place in the family, the labor market and civil society. Family benefits, parental leave regulations, child care provisions, along with reproductive rights have a long history, and are still quite extensive in the post-state socialist region, hence their study should reveal much about the gendered nature of welfare state formation, and its consequences, such as women’s differential chances of falling into poverty.

We selected three countries, Hungary, Poland, and Romania for our analysis, because the gender poverty gap shows interesting variations among them (see the introduction to this issue). Women are over-represented in poverty in Romania, but not (or less so) in Hungary and Poland. Yet, Hungary and Poland differ a great deal in women’s participation in paid work. Therefore, if women’s poverty does not vary (at least on the level of the household), some other institution—either the state or the family—must “pick up the tab”. These contrasts among the three countries prompted us to look for variations in their welfare institutions.

The welfare states in Eastern Europe are in “statu nascendi”: They have been changing in radical ways in the past ten years. While this initially made us wary of studying such volatile and unstable institutions, we realized that even during this period of change we can identify relatively clear trends and trajectories. Some of these trends began under state-socialism and many, we predict, will continue in the future.

We first describe the structure and principles of maternity and parental provisions in Eastern Europe before 1989 as well as some of the social and economic changes which prompted a reconfiguration of these policies. Then we explore the emerging differences in welfare regulations directed at parents in the three countries by comparing them along several dimensions. Volumes of work have been written on the

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1 A note on terminology: Family benefits are sometimes referred to as “child rearing benefits”, or “family allowance” in the literature. To avoid confusion we will stick to the term “family benefits” in this article. Parental leaves will be occasionally called (interchangeably) “maternity leave”, because even though fathers are allowed to take parental leave, extremely few fathers do in fact do so. Thus what is technically “parental” leave, is, in essence, a maternity leave in all three countries. Parental leave is paid, and the amount of money parents receive will be referred to as “parental/maternity leave benefits”.

2 Note that this distinction only works if we talk about poverty measured on the level of the household or the individual, and we assume a full pooling of resources. This assumption is obviously not the case, as studies in this volume attest (see Tarkowska, and Jastrzebska-Szklarska, this volume). Nevertheless, a study of welfare state regimes and their gendered nature should also contribute to a better understanding of intra-household poverty, a phenomenon even less studied in the post-state socialist region than household level poverty.
gendered character of welfare states, as well as on the consequences of various welfare state regimes for women. Most of these works, however, ignore the societies of Eastern Europe (for recent exceptions, see Deacon, 1992, 1997, 2000; Gal and Kligman, 2000; Haney, 2002). As a result, and lacking comparative data of any kind, scholars studying gender relations in the region tend to over-generalize and often treat welfare state development as if it were uniform all over Eastern Europe (Makkai, 1994). Indeed, we found a number of similarities among the three countries we studied, but our goal in this paper is to point out the differences. Our main argument is that the three countries differ significantly in the ways in which they handle parenthood and, as a result, shape gender relations. Specifically, we find that the Polish welfare state is notable for restricting eligibility to family and maternity benefits. Doing so, the state forces women out of the labor force and encourages their dependence on their spouses for their well-being. The Hungarian state, on the other hand, is more accommodating to women seeking a balance between paid work and family. Policies encourage paid work for middle class, white women, creating important distinctions among women, not just between men and women. The Romanian model is different from the Polish one in that it allows more freedom for women to pursue work outside the home, yet it does not provide enough sustenance so women can establish independent households. We will emphasize its overall inability to reorganize existing gender and class stratification. These three models are sufficiently different to explain—at least along with other factors, most notably job availability and household formation—variations in the gender poverty gap and women’s place in post-state socialist societies.

Theoretical background

While mainstream or feminist research on the welfare state has little to say about the specific ways in which state socialist societies provided welfare for their “citizens”, or about how these regimes were modified, maintained or reproduced after the fall of the communist regimes, comparative scholarship on welfare regimes helps identify some of the key dimensions relevant for an analysis of the gendered nature of welfare state formation.

Early feminist scholarship on the welfare state pointed to the nature of gender relations as both the cause and outcome of social institutions and processes. This literature grew out of a growing dissatisfaction with the “gender blindness” of mainstream scholarship on welfare states, which focused narrowly on the causes and consequences of class relations in welfare state formation. Feminist scholars have responded to Esping-Anderson’s path-breaking work by attempting not only to describe gender inequality within the welfare state, but also to “gender the analytic framework” itself (Orloff, 1993). Below we identify elements of this new analytic framework and then apply it to describe—in a comparative manner—the emerging welfare state regimes in Eastern Europe.

In general, the feminist corrective included gendering concepts such as “citizen” and “social rights”, which, while seemingly gender-neutral, are based on a male-
worker standard (Orloff, 1993; Hernes, 1987; Pateman, 1988). For much of the past fifty years, the concept of citizenship was ill fitted to describe the relationship between the state socialist state and its subjects in Eastern Europe, although gendered assumptions about state subjects guided policy-making in these societies as well (Fodor, 2003). After 1989, however, policy-making started to re-establish, in no less a gendered manner, the concept of social citizenship in the political discourse and legislative practice of East European societies. Examining policies concerning maternity and parenting allows us to explore not only gender differences in citizenship rights, but also how, under what conditions, and which groups of women can claim citizenship on the basis of maternity.

One way to uncover whether or not unpaid child care work can be considered a basis of social citizenship is to examine the eligibility criteria for maternity and family benefits. Examining western welfare states, Sainsbury (1996), examining western welfare states, uses welfare typologies to analyze the basis on which women make claims on the state either through labor market status, material need, or citizenship. She argues that the basis for claims-making matters for various gender outcomes. She concludes that, overall, women do best in welfare states where claims are made on the basis of universal citizenship and do worst in states where claims are made on the basis of employment in paid labor. Claims-making is, therefore, an important dimension, which we will use in our analysis of post state socialist welfare states.

Second, Orloff (1993, 1996) calls attention to the issue of women’s participation in paid work and the importance of state provisions which enable this. While women’s welfare can be provided outside the labor market as well, women are in a highly vulnerable position if they must rely on their family for their well-being. Women’s ability to form independent households necessarily hinges on their ability to enter or return to paid work during various points in their life cycle, even if they choose to drop out occasionally. Indeed Sainsbury (1996) distinguishes between “dual-earner” and “male breadwinner” models of social provisions to emphasize exactly this dimension: the friendliness of the welfare state to women’s participation in paid work.

Finally, whether or not women’s welfare (outside the labor market) is primarily provided for by the state or their families is another dimension often identified by researchers as significant to distinguish welfare state regimes. Korpi (2000), for example, describes some welfare regimes as “familial” where mothers primarily stay at home and get support from their families. At the opposite end are states, which provide direct financial support for women, allowing them independence from their spouses and support the labor market.

We used all the above dimensions in our analysis of the welfare state regimes (at least with respect to regulations concerning maternity) in Hungary, Poland and Romania. We also added another dimension which we thought was important to understand the intersections of class and gender—especially since we are primarily interested in the consequences of these welfare regimes for women’s chances of becoming poor. This dimension is concerned with the degree to which state policies differen-
tiate among women: whether or not class or race differences coincide with differential tracks of welfare provisions.

Our analysis is responsive to that produced by O’Connor et al. (1999), who explore within-type differences in what Esping-Anderson calls “residual liberal welfare regimes” to uncover how these regimes shape gender relations differently. They analyze the extent to which states, which fall within the same regime cluster, differ rather dramatically in their effects on gender relations in the areas of reproductive policies, institutional models of motherhood, and women’s roles in paid work. We attempt to do something similar in Eastern Europe: while researchers tend to group post-state socialist societies together, we want to point out the differences in the nature of their emerging welfare state regimes. While these countries had similar features during the state socialist era, real differences are emerging, which must be understood in order to gain a better understanding of the variations in gender relations, as well as its causes and consequences.

Our theoretical contributions are therefore twofold. First, we extend the comparative model of welfare state scholarship to non-western capitalist societies and reshape some aspects of the analytical framework accordingly. Second, we argue for a more sophisticated look at the welfare states within the post state socialist region and call attention to differences rather than similarities, emerging among the countries. With this in mind, after a brief overview of the history of welfare states and recent social trends in Eastern Europe, we turn to an empirical analysis of maternity and family regulations in Hungary, Poland, and Romania.

Social change in post state socialist societies

Family policies under state socialism

State socialist policy makers considered family and maternity policies as important parts of their social engineering project. While the shape and conditions of these provisions varied significantly, there were a number of similarities in the ways in which family and maternity policies were formulated in the three countries. Here we want briefly to review three especially important similarities: their pro-natalist bent, the replacement of social citizenship rights with claims made on the basis of need in the context of state paternalism, and the family and gender ideologies embedded in policy-making.

First, maternity and family provisions in Hungary, Poland and Romania all had pro-natalist goals: they strove to encourage births and increase the size of the population. They did this in different ways in the three countries—from abolishing and criminalizing abortion and making contraceptive unavailable (in Romania, see Kligman, 1998) to introducing generous maternity leave benefits and state contributions to child rearing (in Poland and Hungary). Yet, the openly admitted goal of all these policies was to encourage women to have more children. It should be noted, however, that none of the three countries managed to achieve this goal on a permanent basis.
The birth rates show a gradual decline in Hungary, Poland and Romania after the 1960s, following a similar tendency in much of western Europe.

Second, communist party ideology abolished the idea of citizenship, and thus the well-known western European concept of social citizenship rights and claims-making on this basis can be ignored in describing state socialist societies (Gal and Kligman, 2000). Instead, state socialist states vowed to guarantee welfare on the basis of need, defined from above to accommodate politically advantageous goals at any given time. State subjects—the population—had no influence on policy making\(^3\) and had no rights to any specific social provisions on the basis of citizenship. Instead, the state, when policy makers deemed it fit, allocated benefits in a manner considered expedient, while retaining full control over these resources for themselves. This paternalist practice, noted by a number of observers, resulted in people’s lingering expectations that the state, would take care of them even after 1989 and without their input or contribution.\(^4\)

Finally, mothers’ (and parents’) needs were defined within the general gender and family ideologies of the communist parties. These emphasized the importance of women’s participation in the paid labor force, although this participation did not have to be of the same value or intensity as that of men. In addition, the political ideology considered the nuclear family as the building block of society. Although both husband and wife were expected to work outside the home—a radical break with women’s role in pre-war Eastern Europe—policy makers did not intend to transform men’s role within the domestic division of labor. As a consequence, the general thrust of social policies was to encourage women to balance family and paid work in a specific manner: after the birth of children, women were expected to withdraw from the labor force for a few years but return to full time work thereafter. Maternity leave benefits and other smaller provisions (such as leave for parents if the children were sick) as well as a characteristically large number of in-kind provisions supported this goal. Child care for children under 3 years of age was largely unavailable in much of the region, thus women with small children were not supposed to be in the labor force, unless other female members of their family (grandmothers usually) took over their responsibility. In addition, leave was guaranteed for mothers only—fathers could only take “maternity leave” in Hungary, and only after 1985. State policies thus enforced a very clear pattern of the gendered division of labor within the family as well as a simple pattern of child rearing practices, which both enabled

\(^3\) This is not quite precise. State policy makers did indirectly respond to pressures they perceived within the population and occasionally asked for the opinion of experts and political advisors. Yet, overall, lacking democratic elections and suppressing social organization outside the party of almost every kind—needs and demands could not be formulated in a way that would have achieved serious influence on policy outcomes.

\(^4\) While in some of the countries, maternity leave and pay could be claimed on the basis of employment (such as in Romania), in others as a universal right (as in Hungary after 1985), since over 90% of women of working age were actually engaged in paid work, this was not a meaningful distinction. Not even in principle, since employment itself was not seen as participation in the labor market (thus benefits were not tied to social insurance) but rather as an obligation of all able bodied subjects of the state.
women’s participation in paid work, but simultaneously limited the quality of their participation (Fodor, 2003).

A number of similarities thus existed in the ways in which maternity and family benefits were regulated in Hungary, Poland and Romania. While differences could be found even before 1989 (discussed below), more obvious divergences started to emerge among the countries after the fall of the communist regimes and the start of the marketization and democratization processes.

**Work, reproduction and gender after 1989**

While the actual regulations did not change much in the immediate aftermath of the “revolutions” of 1989—the new laws concerning maternity and family policies were only passed in the middle to the end of the 1990s in all three countries—a number of important trends did start to emerge immediately. Some of these were highly consequential for the transformation of maternity and family policies in the three countries, thus must be mentioned here. Such changes included the reduction of the size of the labor force, an acceleration of previous demographic trends, as well as the reduction in the value of a number of state provisions for families.

The transformation of state socialist planned economies towards a capitalist model progressed at a different speed and intensity in the three countries. Poland experimented with the most radical shock therapy, Hungary followed a slower, more gradual path, while Romania proceeded even slower in privatizing the economy. In all countries, however, the transformation process was accompanied by the end of full employment—the trademark of state socialist planned economies—and the disappearance of up to 30% of jobs, which immediately led to massive unemployment. As a result of the differences in the rapidity and timing of the process, unemployment was the highest in Poland, and lower in the other two countries. Job loss affected men and women differently: women were more likely to be laid off in Poland, and once laid off, were unemployed longer in all three countries (see row 1 in Table 1). The gap between men’s and women’s inactivity rates widened everywhere, with women increasingly trying to find refuge in the domestic realm. The need for the reduction of the labor force increased demands on the state for social provisions, among which family and maternity benefits came to be especially important.

In addition, at the encouragement of international agencies, the real value of state spending on social welfare was reduced drastically in all three countries (Haney, 2002; Goven, 2001). Such international commitments are well known from structural adjustment policies in African and Latin-American societies, and the particularly detrimental effects of such policies on women’s lives have also been noted. Overall, spending on social welfare (and within this category, on family or parental benefits) declined as a percentage of the GDP, or stagnated with an overall decline in GDP (see Table 1). Within this category, spending on maternity and family assistance declined everywhere.

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5 A notable exception is regulation concerning the availability of abortions in all three countries.
Table 1  
Changes in demographic trends, labor force participation and social spending in Hungary, Poland, and Romania 1990–1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hungary</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Romania</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>M: 7.5W: 6.3</td>
<td>n/d</td>
<td>n/d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social spending as percent of GDP</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>28.6 (1996)</td>
<td>n/d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure on family assistance as % of GDP</td>
<td>4.06%</td>
<td>1.78% (1998)</td>
<td>2.0% (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth rate (live birth per 1000 pop)</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion per live birth</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage rate (marriage per 1000 pop)</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce rate(divorce per 1000 pop)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of wedlock birth, as % of all births</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at marriage (women)</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The consequences of these changes, which resulted in increased poverty, instability and insecurity, were also apparent in demographic trends (see Table 1): the birth rates and fertility rates declined sharply in all three countries, although more so in Poland, than in the other two countries.6 Fewer people sought and many postponed marriage. Marriage rates are the lowest and marriage age is the highest in Hungary, where divorce rates are also high. Poland and Romania are more marriage friendly: with lower divorce rates, higher rates of marriage and lower first ages. Many more women have to look after children without the help of spouses: death rates increased sharply for middle aged men, and out of wedlock birth rates soared in each of the countries (less so in Poland than in Romania and Hungary). Again, variation across the countries is sizeable (Poland seemed to have retained more elements of the traditional family: out of wedlock births are low, marriage age did not decline signifi-

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6 This latter fact is interesting in light of the fact that Poland was the only one of the three countries which restricted access to abortion in 1993. The criminalization of abortion, as it has been noted elsewhere (Kligman, 1998), does not necessarily increase the birth rate.
cantly and the divorce rate is the lowest; while Hungary is at the opposite end) yet the overall trends of change are similar.

The reform of maternity and family policies started in earnest around 1993-4. In all the countries, eligibility criteria were restricted and benefits became less generous. Yet, the differences are even more instructive: They show the emergence of different types of welfare regimes in the three post state socialist societies.

Describing family policies in Hungary, Poland, and Romania

The parental leave and family benefit policies have similar components and structures in the three countries. Family benefits consist of a sum of money (increasing with the number of children) paid each month to families who rear children. This is the most direct contribution of the state to the cost of caring for the next generation. Maternity (or, technically, parental) leave and benefits encompass a paid birthing leave of 3–6 months, which mothers (and only mothers) receive after the birth and a parental child-rearing leave for up to 3 years in which time parents can withdraw from the labor force and stay at home with their natural or adopted children. They receive payment from the state, their jobs are guaranteed (if only for a very brief period after their return) and the parental leave period is counted as contributory years in the calculations of (state) retirement pensions. We will also consider the availability of state provided childcare for children between 0–3 years old (which we will call “nursery school”) and 3–6 years old (“kindergarten”). In addition, we mention changes in abortion regulations, because they are often good indications of the “body politic” of a state, and thus have consequences for women’s well-being within it (O’Connor et al., 1999).

The components of the policies are similar, but the eligibility criteria, the principles of allocation as well as a number of other aspects—in other words, the interpretations of caregivers’ social citizenship status—vary widely. In the following pages we describe the differences along four important dimensions: we will consider the bases of entitlements for each policy and country; whether or not state policies encourage women’s paid work; whether or not state policies create distinctions among women by class and race; as well as the timing and changes in policy-making. Then we briefly characterize the gendered nature of each welfare state separately.

Bases for entitlements

Even before the fall of the communist regimes there were sizeable differences among the countries in terms of the bases of entitlement to parental and family benefits, although these differences were mostly technical in nature. In Romania and Poland, for example, women could claim maternity benefits on the basis of employment. Yet, since practically all women were employed, this, in essence, was no different from the situation in Hungary after 1985, when everyone became eligible for maternity benefits regardless of employment status. (Since this distinction remains between the countries in the post-state socialist era, one might argue, how-
ever, that it had longer term consequences.) Importantly, the term “entitlement” is ill-fitted to describe the paternalist welfare provisions of the state socialist states: People were not entitled to benefits, rather they were grateful for the benevolent handouts, wisdom, and generosity of the communist party-state. For this reason, the technical difference in the eligibility criteria were even less significant.

The concept of entitlement started to make sense in the post state socialist region as the communist regimes were replaced by, at least formally, democratically-oriented polities. By the mid-1990s, people began to understand their rights (and especially lack thereof) their rights as citizens of an increasingly tight-fisted state. Important differences in the basis of parental and family entitlements began to emerge in the three countries.

Hungary, after a period of means-testing programs between 1994 and 1998, reverted back to universal entitlements both in the case of family benefits (although after age 6, the benefits are tied to school attendance) and parental benefits (at least for its most general and popular kind). Universal benefits are often the most advantageous for women, because they do not restrict the circle of eligibility and allow women to claim benefits independent of family relations or work history. Indeed, coverage for both family and parental leave benefits is the highest in Hungary of the three countries in our study. Interestingly, the universal eligibility of benefits had a (brief) history in Hungary, but unlike in earlier times, the state socialist legacy is now expected to create advantages for women in terms of escaping poverty and being able to establish independent households, compared to the other countries.

In Romania, family benefits accrue on the basis of universal rights also, but parental leave and pay can only be claimed by women with an employment history of at least 6 months. This means that families of unemployed women are eligible for a monthly lump sum but women’s own child-rearing work is not paid and does not count as paid work for pension purposes either. Mothers therefore either depend on the market, by participating in the labor force and paying social insurance, or on their families, if they opt or are forced out of the labor market. Given the volatility of the current economic period, characterized by shrinking labor markets, soaring out-of-wedlock births, and declining marriage rates, these benefits are less reliable for guaranteeing sufficient income for women with dependent children.

Poland is at the other extreme of the universal non-universal continuum: neither benefit may be claimed a right of universal citizenship, both are means tested and, in fact, parental leaves and benefits are means tested and can only be claimed by women who had spent at least a year in the labor force (in other words, they are also insurance based). This restricts the circle of those eligible in many ways, and indeed coverage of both benefits is the lowest in Poland. In addition, means-testing is known for stigmatizing the recipients of benefits, which since parental leave is practically only taken by women, is especially detrimental for the social status of mothers. Women are thus dependent on their families or the labor market for income maintenance, and the state interferes only in the case of family and market failure. Not surprisingly, Poland is the only country of the three in our study where family benefits can be given in kind (rather than in money) cases where a social worker
decides that the money is not spent appropriately, emphasizing the stigmatizing and paternalistic character of this benefit.

Thus, there are significant differences among the three countries in the basis of eligibility for benefits. Hungary, following its recent state socialist legacy (and only temporarily giving in to structural adjustment requirements) provides, for the most part, universal benefits to women in the case of maternity. Poland, which followed international monetary regulations the most closely, introduced the most strict, most paternalistic, and stigmatizing eligibility criteria, while Romania balances in between: providing universal coverage for families, but devaluing women’s child-rearing work at home.

**Kitchen or the office?**

State policies, particularly those which directly address child-rearing, deeply influence women’s ability to combine work and family obligations. While technically all three countries allow fathers to take parental leave, this is still the rare exception; it is women who drop out of the labor force in order to look after children. Parental leave policies, therefore, regulate women’s relationship to the labor market, sometimes encouraging mothers to withdraw from the labor force, sometimes allowing a balance between work and family obligations. Our argument is that Poland is on the former end of the balance, while Hungary on the latter, with Romania, again, somewhere in between.

Hungary is the only country which allows women on maternity leave (those on “GYES” and “GYET”7) to work part time after the first birthday of their child. This allows women to retain some of their ties with the labor force and facilitate a potential return. Work is not allowed in either of the other two countries.

In all countries, time spent on maternity leave counts as paid work—but the usefulness of this provision varies by country. Practically all women who have children benefit from it in Hungary where eligibility is universal, but only a fraction of Polish women can take advantage of the same regulation because many fewer are eligible for maternity leave. After all, eligibility is based both on employment status and economic need. Middle-class Polish women must rely on their husbands for upkeep while out of the labor force to rear children, and possibly suffer the consequences later as they see a reduction in their pensions. In Romania, where maternity benefits are insurance based, a lower proportion of women can take advantage of them. Once outside the labor force, women are completely dependent on their families for subsistence during and often after the child-rearing years.

Another state provision must be considered here: state subsidized child care services. While exact numbers on state spending on child care facilities are not available, cross-country differences in the number of children in nursery school (for 0–

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7 As will be explained later, Hungary has three types of maternity leave policies for three different types of women. “GYES” (loosely translated as “child care benefit”) is by far the most popular of these benefits, and women receiving GYES are allowed to work for pay, 4 hours per day, after the first birthday of their child.
3 year olds) and kindergarten (3–6 year olds) are instructive. These differences are particularly important, since each country provides women (all women in Hungary, insured women in Poland and Romania) with birthing leaves, which includes 3–6 months of leave at a generous salary replacement rate of 70–100%, or the amount of the minimum pension for uninsured women in Hungary. But who takes care of the children after this leave expires?

In all countries, young children up to the age of 3 are looked after at home. Hungarian women take maternity leave, while non-insured Romanian and non-insured, non-poor Polish women either stay home or drop out of the labor force without pay or entrust their children to other women, usually female relatives or occasionally, paid help. None of the three states encourage public care for small children: 2% (in Poland) to 10% (in Hungary) of children between the ages of 0 and 3 are in nursery school. However, public child care availability is quite different when we examine state funded day care for 3–6 year olds. At this point, even the most generous maternity leave benefits have expired and women may be in a position to consider returning to paid work. In Hungary over 85% of children in the relevant age group are in kindergarten (which, contrary to popular belief, represents a small percentage point increase since 1990). While there are some private day care centers, less than 10% of children take advantage of those. In other words, the vast majority of children are in public childcare in Hungary. In Romania around 65%, and in Poland 33% of children are in kindergarten. This means that the state takes over the day care of practically all children after age 3 in Hungary, but only about two thirds in Romania, and a third in Poland. Women must make their own arrangements within their families or on the market.

In sum, state policies in Hungary, Poland, and Romania encourage and enable women’s labor force participation to different degrees. None of the three countries provide much support for children under the age of 3, thus women rarely have the option of returning to work a few months after childbirth, should they need or want to. In Hungary, state support, is given to all mothers who want to stay at home and raise their children, and mothers are allowed to start a slow reintegration process into paid work towards the end of their leave. In Poland, 16 weeks of the birthing leave is obligatory; women must leave the labor force for this period. The proportion of kids in child-care is the lowest in this country and the circle of women eligible for maternity leave the smallest. Thus Polish maternity and child-care policies encourage women to drop out of the labor force upon childbirth and not return until their children reach school age. This forces women into a highly dependent position: they must rely on their spouses or other family members for well-being while rearing children. This dependence likely continues later in the life course as well, as a conse-

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8 To be precise, all women are eligible for GYES (see above) immediately after birth of a child in Hungary. Insured women can take advantage of a more generous leave, specifically targeting women who recently gave birth.

9 It should be noted that contrary to popular belief, this number represents a mere 10–20% reduction since 1990, which roughly corresponds to the decline in the number of children born in these countries. No vast state withdrawal from nursery school funding may be observed in any of the countries in our study.
quence of the penalties of time spent out of the labor force raising children. The situation in Romania is in between Hungary and Poland: women who have jobs are assisted by the state in raising children and need only temporarily withdraw from the labor force. Some child-care is also available after the age of 3, although it is often only for part of the day, requiring families to provide childcare themselves or to seek private care on the market. Women out of the labor force, however, are left completely dependent on their own and their families resources, financial and otherwise.

**Tracking and differentiation among women**

State policies create distinctions not only between men and women, but also among women. We argue that the Hungarian state, while perhaps the most inclusive and generous of the three, is also the most extreme in its efforts to track women into different channels and to distribute benefits accordingly.

Family benefits are given as lump sums to all families in all three countries. However, distinctions are made regarding the ideal family size. These distinctions include not increasing the family benefits after the third child in Hungary and Poland, and withholding benefits from women with large families in Romania. These distinctions potentially exacerbate class differences in all three countries, and bear positively racist undertones in Hungary and Romania where the Roma minority is by far more likely to fall in the large family category. In essence, eugenic norms are employed in all three countries in the distribution of family benefits (Mink, 1998).

The value of family benefits is declining rapidly and benefits are gradually being replaced by another type of child rearing benefit in Hungary and Romania: tax credits for children. Tax credits are still a very small part of child care contributions in Romania, but they are more significant in Hungary. However, tax credits can only be used by people who earn enough to claim them—middle-class workers, whose taxable income is sufficiently high. As a result, about a third of all parents are unable to take full advantage of what is essentially middle-class (and non-Roma) family support in Hungary.

In addition, distinctions are also made in the allocation of maternity leave policies. While each country has a more generous insurance based period provided for women right after birth (at 100% of pay in Poland, 85% in Romania, and 70% in Hungary) after this, the maternity benefit system is simple and single-tracked everywhere, except in Hungary. In Romania and Poland the real distinction is between women eligible for maternity leave and those who are not. Those who are not are left out of the system altogether. In Hungary, however, since 1999, three types of maternity leaves and benefits exist: a shorter (2-year) insurance based leave for previously employed women (again, a remnant from the state socialist past), and two universal tracks: one medium length (3 years) for all women who want to claim it and a special track for career housewives, defined as women who rear three or more children under the age of 8. The first insurance-based track is tied to past income (at 70% replacement rate). Thus, even though a maximum exists, it replaces wages better than the other two benefits, which equal the sum of the minimum pension. Middle-class,
white women are better able to take advantage of this benefit, while poor women and minority groups receive a less generous (albeit universal) provision. In Hungary, as compared to Poland and Romania, the welfare state does not differentiate to whom it provides benefits and services, but does distinguish among the types of benefits for which women of different classes and races are eligible.

**Discussion: causes and consequences**

Can the gendered character of maternity and family provisions contribute to the explanation of cross-country variations in poverty? We can only make plausible hypotheses on the basis of our data; later study will have to link our evidence to the actual processes of inequality generation. Yet, it seems clear that women in the minimalist Romanian state do not receive enough support to pull them out of poverty in a situation when women marry later and almost a fourth of all women have children out of wedlock (see Table 1). State subsidies are restricted to employed women, or, as in the case of family assistance, are too meager to provide sufficient income (even as a supplement to work on the black market) for the establishment of independent households. Women, especially mothers, are expected to be at a higher risk of poverty.

In Hungary, women have a better chance of combining work and family obligations, even if family support is fading fast. Yet here the state is especially willing to provide assistance to middle-class women, and is less generous regarding those already at a risk of poverty. Nevertheless, universal benefits allow even poor women some independence from the market.

Measured on the level of the household, women in Poland are also no more likely to be poor than men. This, however, cannot be explained by the wide circle of eligibility or generosity of state benefits: women’s labor is de-commodified, but this is paid for by the family, not the state, a fact which creates vulnerability and dependence.

What factors explain the differences, which are emerging across the countries? Certainly, differences existed even before 1989: Hungary had universal provisions for child care and maternity, while Romania and Poland tied eligibility to employment status. Hungary already spent a higher percentage of GDP on family policy measures than the other two countries in 1990. But these differences began to take on new meanings and to have more serious consequences only after the fall of the communist regimes.

Though a thorough explanation of the wide variation in the gendered nature of welfare provision in Hungary, Poland and Romania is beyond the scope of this paper, we do provide a few tentative hypotheses. Our starting point is Bob Deacon’s argument (1992) about the importance of a number of factors in shaping welfare state formation. The key differences he saw between the three countries in our study (Deacon, 1992: 181) were with respect to economic development (Poland and Hungary medium, Romania low); the importance of the Catholic Church (Poland high, Hungary and Romania low); working class mobilization (high in Romania and
Poland, low in Hungary and Poland, low in Romania). For our purposes, we want to point to the gendered consequences of some of these factors. We hypothesize, for example, that in Poland a male dominated Solidarity-based government, combined with the influence of the Catholic church, contributed to the conservative, family-centered nature of policies in Poland. In addition, pressure from of international agencies and the rapidity of structural adjustment led to the reduction of welfare spending and relocated the site of welfare outside the responsibility of the state (Haney, 2002). The lack of a strong mass labor movement in Hungary, as well as the relative weakness of the conservatively oriented influence of the Catholic Church, might have prevented policy makers from following a similar route. International monetary organizations had some influence in Hungary as well, which resulted in restrictions in maternity and family benefit eligibility between 1994–98 (Goven, 2001). However, by the end of the millenium, the government used the political momentum to reintroduce its selectively pro-natalist, yet primarily still universal, system. In Romania, the combination of a stalled economic development, compounded with a male dominated mass movement, may have led to the withdrawal of the state from providing welfare arguably as a backlash against the over-imposing Ceausescu regime.

In sum, we explored differences in the maternity and family policy regimes of three post-state socialist countries: Hungary, Poland and Romania. We argued for the importance of understanding their differences, in addition to their shared historical legacy in the second half of the 20th century. We found three different types of welfare regimes emerging in the three countries, which we argue, already has, and will certainly continue to have significant consequences for women’s place in these societies. In particular we argue that differences in the structure of welfare provisions will have significant consequences for women’s chances of becoming poor and for women’s overall life chances in these societies.

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References


