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Revolutions and revolutionaries:  
from the gender perspective

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## The Visible and Invisible Role of Women in Czech Dissent During the 1970s and 1980s<sup>1</sup>

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*In Czechoslovakia, similarly to other socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various opposition/dissident groups were acting with the aim to contradict and subvert official – communist – regimes (dissidents engaged, for example, in publishing and distributing samizdat literature or organizing protests and petitions). With the help of twenty-one interviews with women from Czech dissent, this paper reflects on the basic gender relationships and possible stereotypes and hierarchies within the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and mainly the 1980s. It confirms the supportive, “invisible” role of women in this sphere, but also draws attention to their active participation in dissident activities.*

**Keywords:** Czech, dissent, gender, oral history, socialism.

### “Normalization” in Czechoslovakia as a historical background for dissident activities

The piece of work presented here contributes to the discussion about the role of women in Czech dissent – a topic which has not yet been sufficiently reflected and elaborated by historians, despite the fact that without women’s participation and work, the dissident movement would not have been viable and its key role as an opposition platform to the ruling communist regime could not have been adequately fulfilled.<sup>2</sup> The focus here is on the two decades

<sup>1</sup> The article was prepared with the support of the funds of the Czech Grant Agency, as part of the project 17-14167S “The Student Generation of 1989 in Longitudinal Perspective: Biographical Interviews after Twenty Years”.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that historians and social scientists are becoming increasingly aware of this important aspect of the opposition movement is reflected by, for example, the project Women in Dissent, conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences since January 2017.

after the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies into Czechoslovakia in 1968, the period known as normalization, characterized by a considerable effort to suppress all democratizing and reformative tendencies of the end of the 1960s and a return to the time before the Prague Spring.

“Normalization” was a conservative and anti-socialist act of “restoration of order” emerging from the sphere of power elites; thus the Communist Party leadership ceased to be supported not only by the population but also by its own members and its power was entirely dependent on the Soviet leadership. Not only former Communists were expelled to the fringes of society, but so were intellectuals politically and socially involved in the democratization process. Later on, these people formed the core of the emerging opposition movement. In the second half of the 1970s, the persecution of the underground music movement was an impulse for the unification of a still fragmented opposition – diverse opposition groups joined together to defend fundamental human rights. Protest actions and solidarity with the underground influenced, together with the intervention of the security authorities, the transformation of these groups into a political force.<sup>3</sup>

Within this broader framework, the article’s focus aimed on women’s participation in Czech dissent during the period of so-called normalization takes two dimensions: dissident activities on the one hand and gender relations/roles as performed and perceived within the dissident environment on the other. The topic is interpreted within the given political context which represents an important variable shaping the gender hierarchy in Czech dissent (with respect to the interview collection, the Slovak experience cannot be reflected here).

### Existing literature by former female-dissidents and by female-scholars

Regarding already existing pieces of work on the topic, two authors, both women who actively participated in dissent,<sup>4</sup> should be mentioned first – Kamila Bendová<sup>5</sup> and Jiřina Šiklová<sup>6</sup>. The former perceived women in dissent as playing an important role on the very level of the existence of the

3 Milan OTÁHAL, *Opozice, moc a společnost 1969–1979. Příspěvek k dějinám „normalizace“*, Praha, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1994, 20, 35–37.

4 Individuals and groups that publicly and openly express opinions different from official ruling ideologies. In Central and Eastern Europe, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dissidents tried to resist official regimes by issuing so-called samizdat [self-published] literature, organizing petitions, protest rallies etc.

5 Kamila BENDOVÁ, “Ženy v Chartě 77. Vzpomínky na ty, které vydržely“, in *Opozice a odpor proti komunistickému režimu v Československu 1968–1989*, (ed.) Petr BLAŽEK, Praha, Dokořán, 2005, 54–66. Kamila Bendová was born in 1946; she graduated from the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University. Her husband, Václav Benda, was a Charter 77 signatory and spokesman; he was imprisoned for his activities between 1979 and 1983. They had six children.

6 Jiřina Šiklová was born in 1935; she graduated from the Faculty of Arts, Charles University; she was also a co-founder of the Department of Sociology at this faculty. From May 1981 to March 1982, she was imprisoned for smuggling illegal literature.

dissident movement. She describes the role of women-mothers in line with traditional notions of supporting the family. These female duties included not only childcare and housework, but also, for example, “supporting” the male partner when he was imprisoned, providing him with courage, optimism, and hope – whether via letters or just by the fact that the husband did not have to worry about the family and, children being at home, and knew that the woman could manage everything. In Bendová’s view, this female role in marriage included also securing the family’s livelihood and continuing in the partner’s dissident activities during his absence (imprisonment, service in the army etc.).<sup>7</sup> The second author, Jiřina Šiklová emphasized the key position of women in the opposition movement; she calls them “workers” of dissent (tireless organizers of conspiracy meetings, actors of everyday “gray” dissident work, copy-writers, supporters of their imprisoned partners and sons etc.).<sup>8</sup>

Besides these works, historian Květa Jechová prepared a study about women in the dissident group Charta 77 [Charter 77]; she writes, among other things, that there were many women in the Charter who supported their male partners’ decisions, shared with men all hardship and various sanctions and still kept their households running, taking care of children’s health and education when their fathers, the Charter signatories, were persecuted and imprisoned. Without the approval and support of these women, the men would not have endured in their struggle.<sup>9</sup> Martina Hynková used gender as a category of historical analysis in her master’s thesis;<sup>10</sup> she looked at the role of women-dissidents in terms of construction and reconstruction of gender relations and positions. She conducted her research with a stress on three female positions – woman as a creator and/or supporter, her everyday life and her “silent” heroism.

Within the international context, the book *Solidarity’s Secret* by Shana Penn<sup>11</sup> should be mentioned first and foremost; she concentrates on the crucial role of women behind the Polish pro-democracy movement, whose work and massive contributions to this movement were rather overlooked, “hidden” by more public successes of male activists.

All these texts confirm the important and irreplaceable role of women in dissent. They also show, to varying degree, how this role was diminished, overlooked, how the importance of women in dissent was played down, often by the female-actors themselves. Thus, as in other spheres of life, women

7 BENDOVÁ, “Ženy v Chartě 77. Vzpomínky na ty, které vydržely“, 54.

8 Jiřina ŠIKLOVÁ, “O ženách v disentu“, in *Rod ženský*, (ed.) Alena VODÁKOVÁ – Olga VODÁKOVÁ, Praha, Sociologické nakladatelství, 2003, 204–207. Jiřina ŠIKLOVÁ, “Podíl českých žen na samizdatu a opoziční činnosti v Československu v období tzv. normalizace v letech 1969–1989“, *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum* Vol. 9, 1/2008, 39–44.

9 Květa JECHOVÁ, *Lidě Charty 77: zpráva o biografickém výzkumu*, Praha, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2003, 69.

10 Martina HYNKOVÁ, “Tiché hrdinky“ *Charty 77: genderovanost českého disentu*, MA dissertation, Brno, Masarykova univerzita, 2009.

11 Shana PENN, *Solidarity’s Secret. The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*, University of Michigan Press, 2005, 1–18.

are sidelined, put into the role of “the other”, those who are determined and differentiated by their relationship to men.<sup>12</sup>

## Questions and method

The outputs of previous works, research conducted on the topic as briefly outlined above, and memories of women-dissidents themselves raise important questions: Did the dissident movement, by its very nature subversive of the ruling communist power, also subvert gender order in society? Did gender relationships within the dissident community mirror gender order in society? What gender relationships and hierarchies prevailed in the dissident movement?

I work with Joan Scott's concept of gender as a category of historical analysis. Specifically, I take into account the idea that gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, that it is a primary of signifying power relationships.<sup>13</sup> I build my argument around the analysis and interpretation of interviews with women who had a dissident experience.

As part of two projects conducted at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in the late 1990s and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>14</sup> twenty-one interviews with women participating in dissident activities were collected (sixteen from Charter 77, four from the Independent Peace Movement and one from Czech Children). The majority of them were born between 1913 and 1938 (ten women), two in 1947, three in the 1950s and six women in the 1960s. More than half of these women (twelve) were settled in Prague (or around Prague) during the period of their dissident activities; three in Brno and five in other big Czech or Moravian towns. This regional representation reflects the fact that Prague represented a center of these activities, followed by Brno.<sup>15</sup> From all 297 women who signed Charter 77<sup>16</sup> in the period from 1977 to 1989, this set of the interviews<sup>17</sup> represents almost 6 % of all women-signatories.

12 Simone de BEAUVOIR, *Druhé pohlaví*, Praha, Orbis, 1966, 10.

13 Joan W. SCOTT, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”, *The American Historical Review* Vol. 91 5/1986, 1053–1075.

14 36 life stories of Charta 77 members, recorded in between 1992–1996 (Květa JECHOVÁ, *Lidé Charty 77: zpráva o biografickém výzkumu*, Praha, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2003). Political elite and dissent during so-called normalization. Biographical interviews, project funded by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, 2002–2004.

15 In the study, the experience of Slovak women is not reflected upon, mainly because the „normalization“ process after the 1968 invasion of Warsaw Troop armies was less radical, national issues were emphasized in Slovakia and thus, for example, the Charter 77 program did not meet Slovak requirements.

16 Overall out of about 1884 signatories, women represented about 22 % (423 women). This is also one of the signs that the sphere of dissent had not been freely available to women. (*Charta 77 – všichni signatáři*, <https://charta77.wordpress.com/2008/12/19/charta-77-signatari/>, accessed 2017-05-19.)

17 Here I am counting 17 women, since four of them did not sign Charter 77. Either their activities in the dissident movement were associated with another dissident group or they were actively participating without a signature – to be able to keep their activities under cover. (JECHOVÁ, *Lidé Charty 77: zpráva o biografickém výzkumu*, 69.)

With respect to the representativeness of the sample, a sufficient level was reached as for the age (year of birth) and regional distribution. Still, it is not a representative sample per se created by a random choice; the main method for selection used was a snowball one. Because of this, the text here presented is designed as a case study and the emphasis is put on understanding the “text” (i.e. interview, or rather its transcription) from its own context, not from the context of the researcher – since meaning is included in the text.<sup>18</sup>

As for the interviews, which are the basic source of knowledge here, their style, way of questioning, thematic focus etc. were not primarily gender sensitive, rather they were aimed at the topic of dissident activities, relationships in the movement, opposition to the ruling regime etc. I worked with an existing archive of interviews, specifically with transcripts, recorded in the period 2003–2004; the characteristics of this set of primary sources had to be taken into account when interpreting the interviews. Perhaps the most important thing in this context was to be aware a “loss of meanings” during the transcription.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, written text (transcription) enables more time and space for interpretative work, for analysis. To fully use this benefit and not to lose too much from the narration, I listened to interviews in key moments to “check” the meaning, to hear if, for example, the voice was in contradiction with the written words. The written records from the interview proved to be very valuable and helpful at this phase of work. These “field documents” contain as much information about the interview as possible, including various interruptions, mood, emotions etc. With these notes I could better imagine the narrator's personality and understand the life story presented more deeply.

As I have already mentioned, the interviews were not conducted in a gender sensitive manner. On top of that, almost all of them include some parts when researchers acted in conformity with gender stereotypes. For example (typically): when a woman-mother was jailed for her dissident activities, the interviewer/researcher asked a question which implicitly inquired if political issues were really so important that they were worth separating children from their mother. Thus the interviews also create a “secondary” record about gender issues in an academic environment in the Czech Republic at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Despite the limits when working with interview transcriptions and a gender insensitive approach to primary research, the oral history format

18 Jane C. KRONICK, “Alternativní metodologie pro analýzu kvalitativních dat“, *Sociologický časopis* Vol. 33, 1/1997, 57–68.

19 As Alessandro Portelli points out: The tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in notation. The same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker's intonation, which cannot be represented objectively in the transcript, but only approximately described in the transcriber's own words. (Alessandro PORTELLI, “What makes oral history different?”, in *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (ed.) Robert PERKS – Alistair THOMSON, London, New York – Routledge, 1998, 65.)

with “life story” and “topic interview”<sup>20</sup> offers a wide range of possibilities for reflecting on gender issues (all the interviews were done with respect to oral history “best practices”). A well conducted interview offers space enough for the narrator to reflect her or his own thoughts, feelings, memories, and thus point to what is important, what they want to be recorded etc. Direct quotations from the interviews were translated from Czech to English (keeping in mind the style of the original narrative) and are presented under pseudonyms – arbitrarily assigned female names.

The core of the study is a reflection on gender issues as experienced in the Czech dissident movement during the 1970s and 1980s (all the women interviewed were active in dissent during these years). Under the influence of the Helsinki Conference held in 1975, the program of a substantial part of dissident activities became human and civil rights. In the dissident environment, a number of important independent groups emerged from the second half of the 1970s and especially in the 1980s (three of them are represented in the sample of interviews<sup>21</sup>). Charter 77, which operated between 1977 and 1992, is considered the most important and the best known of them. Its origins date back to January 1, 1977, when the Charter 77 Declaration on the formation of an informal and open community of civil and human rights defenders was issued.

Before the analysis itself, a few remarks on official gender politics are in order. The development of women’s positions during state socialism can be generally divided into two approximately equally long stages (the 1950s and 1960s; the 1970s and 1980s) with the emancipation phase being situated rather in the first one. The main initiator of this change was a massive entering of women into the paid workforce after the communist coup d’état in 1948. This process was directed from above. The development was motivated mainly by the economic interests of new post-war regimes.<sup>22</sup> Women were defined primarily as workers, which was part of an effort to homogenize and equalize people, to eliminate all social differences, including gender ones, in order to create a “new socialist man”.<sup>23</sup>

As a consequence, women became more economically, socially, and

20 Donald A. RITCHIE, *Doing Oral History*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1995, 66.

21 The main dissident groups were (besides the, in a sense “umbrella”, organization Charta 77): Committee for the Defense of Unjustly Prosecuted People/Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných; Jazz section/Jazzová sekce; The Society of the Friends of the USA/Společnost přátel USA; Democratic Initiative/Demokratická iniciativa; Independent Peace Association/Nezávislé mírové sdružení; Czech Children/České děti; Civil Liberties Movement/Hnutí za občanskou svobodu; Association of Catholic Lay People – Peace on Earth/Sdružení katolických laiků – Pokoj na zemi; Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee/Československý helsinský výbor; Club for Socialist Reconstruction/Klub za socialistickou přestavbu – Obroda; Underground (Petr KOURA, “Dissent nebyl žádné ghetto”, *Česká pozice*, 17. 11. 2014, [http://ceskapozice.lidovky.cz/dissent-nebyl-zadne-ghetto-0yb-/tema.aspx?c=A141113\\_160239\\_pozice-tema\\_kasa](http://ceskapozice.lidovky.cz/dissent-nebyl-zadne-ghetto-0yb-/tema.aspx?c=A141113_160239_pozice-tema_kasa), accessed 2017-05-21).

22 Ivan VODOCHODSKÝ, “Patriarchát na socialistický způsob: k genderovému řádu státního socialismu”, *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum* Vol. 8, 2/2007, 36.

23 Susan GAL – Gail KLIIGMAN, *The Politics of Gender After Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay*, Princeton University Press, 2000, 47.

psychologically independent of men, essentially in being capable of ensuring a livelihood for themselves and their family. A new system made it easier for women to terminate marriages and tried to relieve them from routine work in the home. Still, within this socialist emancipation the vast majority of domestic duties and tasks continued to be held by women. As a result, apart from greater autonomy and self-confidence, women consistently endured physical and mental stress and tiredness from the “double burden”<sup>24</sup> of work in the paid job and at home.<sup>25</sup> The achieved emancipation steps consolidating the status of women in society was replaced by a stagnation from the 1970s onwards. The reasons were twofold: 1) a “communization” of the functions that in a traditional household were held by women, proved to be too expensive, practically unfeasible and not particularly welcomed by the public; 2) socialist societies faced a real threat of significant population decline.<sup>26</sup>

On the one hand, many families necessarily needed two incomes to make a living; on the other hand, equality had not been achieved within the private sphere, women continued to perform the role of mothers and carried out the aforementioned “double burden”. Thus, in fact, despite the declared efforts to achieve gender equality, gender differences were further exacerbated during socialism.<sup>27</sup>

## Women in dissent and in the family – analysis and interpretation of interviews

It is within this historical and social context that some women encountered the dissident movement. Undoubtedly, it was a highly remarkable milestone influencing their lives, their relationships, and their future; because of that I will start my analysis focusing on this moment, the first impetus for their step toward the opposition. After that, I will focus on their everyday life with respect to dissident activities; finally, I conclude the article with women’s participation in the revolutionary events of 1989.

As for their beginnings in the opposition, the interviews reveal that an overwhelming majority of women got in touch with dissent by chance, by meeting the “right” people. Certainly, men also needed to know the “right” people to enter the dissident movement; it results - to a great extent – from

24 Jiřina ŠIKLOVÁ, “Feminism and the roots of apathy in the Czech Republic”, *Social Research* Vol. 64, 2/1997, 267.

25 VODOCHODSKÝ, “Patriarchát na socialistický způsob: k genderovému řádu státního socialismu”, 36.

26 Ibid, 37.

27 For further discussion of women’s double burden under socialism see for example: BREN, Paulina, “Women on the Verge of Desire: Women, Work, and Consumption in Socialist Czechoslovakia”, in *Pleasures in Socialism. Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, (ed.) David CROWLEY – Susan E. REID, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2010, 177–196; BONFIGLIOLI, Chiara, “A Working Day that has no End: The Double Burden in Socialist Yugoslavia”, *Europäische Geschichte*, 23. 5. 2017, <http://www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id/artikel-4168>, accessed 2017-09-29.



the fact that dissident activities were illegal, hidden, carried out in conspiracy. But women in majority “passively” accepted their role in dissent as being partners, sisters, daughters, wives. There were only two women in the group who found their “own way” to join and actively participate in the dissident movement. Both of them are active persons, with a strong self-awareness, sense of justice and equality. At the moment of joining the dissident circles, one of them was single and the other divorced. With a certain degree of speculation, this implies a need for personal freedom (in a sense of freedom of spirit and freedom/equality in relationships) as a basis for independent engagement in activities undermining the oppression people experienced.

This corresponds with Sherry B. Ortner’s conception of a culturally perceived general inferiority of women, which is a result from their association with nature, considered to be inferior to culture; man is a symbol of culture and civilization that controls nature. According to Ortner, there are three main arguments for why women are associated with nature: 1) the perception of their bodies is tied much more to reproductive functions; because of this, women are viewed as being closer to nature than men; 2) women’s social role – their location within the family context, where everything tied with the family is always subordinated to public issues; 3) as a result of this bonding of women’s bodies and their social role, the psyche of women is perceived as being closer to nature. Ortner demonstrates that this social delimitation (limitation) of women is due primarily to the effects of socio-structural systems, not congenital biological factors.<sup>28</sup>

Not only was it much harder for women to find their way into the public sphere generally, but also because of their socialization as those primarily responsible for the private sphere, they were not always welcomed in the sphere of dissent (even if democratization was one of the main preferred values of the dissident movement).

In January 1977 I was nineteen. [...] On Christmas, my father, Zdeněk Mlynář, one of the significant collectors of signatures for Charter 77, brought the text to my grandfather to sign it. My mother and I, of course, we also wanted to sign. [...] And my father said, “No, we only want important people.” It offended my so mother that she never signed the Charter again. And I was deeply influenced too.<sup>29</sup>

When entering a dissident circle, a woman’s role was seen as primarily a supportive one. A vast majority of memories collected is in conformity with the above-mentioned role of women as “workers” of dissent, as Jiřina

28 Sherry B. ORTNER, “Má se žena k muži jako příroda ke kultuře?“, in *Divčí válka s ideologií*, (ed.) Libora OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ, Praha, Sociologické nakladatelství, 89–114.

29 Milena BARTLOVÁ, “Jsem třetí generace žen s doktorátem a to je hodně silná energie“, *Ženy v disentu*, <http://zenyvdisentu.soc.cas.cz/aktuality/milena-bartlova-jsem-treti-generace-zen-s-doktoratem-a-to-je-hodne-silna-energie#.WSCBylTyjGg>, accessed 2017-05-20.

Šiklová writes about them. They remember mainly transcribing various texts, distributing samizdat, arranging and organizing events etc. Similarly, Shana Penn writes about women in the Polish opposition as those taking on the role of invisible organizers and propagators.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes women’s supporting roles were directly linked to the very basis of women’s embeddedness in the private sphere.

Our flat became one of those centers where people used to go very often. It was because I was still at home and the flat was in the city center. Thus one could be quite sure that when someone rings, he will find someone here. (Andrea)

Concerning dissident activities, however, men actively entered the family sphere (primarily ascribed to “women”) – just because in this environment dissident activities could take place and be concealed. How did this fact influence and change the network of relationships? It is important to take into account that the actual liquidation of civil society during state socialism transformed the significance of the public and private spheres in people’s lives. The formerly prestigious public sphere of employment, political and civil engagement, traditionally the main domain of men, suddenly became uninteresting and unpleasant in any areas, and even dangerous in some cases.<sup>31</sup> And vice versa, the importance of the private sphere increased, as the family could become a refuge of freedom, taking over many functions of the former public sphere, typically moral and civil education.<sup>32</sup> This can be illustrated with the “legendary” custom remembered by many people brought up before 1989: “in school/in public one must not talk about what is spoken about at home”, i.e. a sort of “learned” silence in public. This, of course, was particularly true for dissident families where the values of freedom, and democracy were stressed, and mostly by men – in “conformity” with gender role distribution within the dissident environment. However, this distinction must not be generalized in a simple way as a simple contradiction between state and civil society – this assumption has been contested in recent years.<sup>33</sup>

The importance of the private sphere was further strengthened if it became a space for independent activities. Intellectuals, women and men, working and participating in discussion and seminars in flats, simulated the public sphere in private spaces. In such circumstances, the dichotomy of man as connected with the public sphere and woman with private space was unsustainable. But it does not mean that this change in the “distribution

30 PENN, *Solidarity’s Secret. The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*, 1–18.

31 VODOCHODSKÝ, “Patriarchát na socialistický způsob: k genderovému řádu státního socialismu“, 37.

32 HANA HAVELKOVÁ, “A few prefeminist thoughts“, in *Gender politics and post-communism. Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Thinking Gender*, (ed.) Nanette FUNK – Magda MÜLLER, New York/London, Routledge, 1993, 92.

33 See for example Matt KILLINGSWORTH, *Civil Society in Communist Eastern Europe. Opposition and Dissent in Totalitarian Regimes*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2012.

of forces” brought about the strengthening of women’s roles. Women still occupied caregiving, supportive positions; and even those women who actively participated in dissident activities diminish their role in retrospect.

My participation was rather *marginal*. I myself did not create any papers, documents, that was not the case. So my anti-regime activity was just that I copied some texts, then me and other people, we were doing that normal drudgery by making those samizdat papers, we distributed leaflets... Such a small activity, I do not know, *I even wrote articles* or interviews for the samizdat, without any narrower focus, not really what I enjoyed, but rather *what was needed*. (Cecilia, emphasis Lenka Krátká)

In the above quotation I marked changes in the mode of how this woman expressed her activity and importance within the dissident movement. She starts with describing her supportive, marginal role; then she remembers her own literary works which represent her active participation, as well as intellect, knowledge, and writing skills. At the end, she degrades her work as an activity she enjoyed, without any “focus”. And then, she puts herself again into a “subservient” position of a woman who did what was needed (not what she wanted or considered important).

A similar example illustrates how a woman diminishes her activities in relation to her husband, thus making herself invisible, reproducing the patriarchal gender order by pointing to her weakness and stressing his effort.

Up to eleven sheets of paper could be put there [in the type writer], so it was quite thick, and because he had a strong stroke, *I could not manage it, I would do as much as five, he did it*. [...] In 1979 *my poetical composition was published*, so from that date, *we were* already in the PPH [samizdat edition], the people managing the edition had already counted on us and invited us to work with them. So, there were those ten, eleven people because more copies could not be done, that was the basis. [...] *My husband did a lot of copywriters*. When a book was needed, [...] he always completed it; he made it all, my husband. So my husband *was a supervisor*. (Barbara, emphasis Lenka Krátká)

The woman starts the narrative with emphasis on her husband’s strength, his masculinity; then she mentions her literary work but mainly as a moment when they both as a couple became a part of publishing samizdat. Her literary work which represented that key moment for entrance into samizdat edition is not described here in detail; instead of this, her husband’s role when disseminating samizdat is described with an emphasis of his leading role. The husband’s role as a leader runs throughout the interview: “Not to be my husband, I did not do as much as I did.” (Barbara)

An important moment in a woman’s life trajectory was motherhood. In many cases, it can be described in the way one woman remembers it: “In 1981, I got married and then I had one child every year, so my activity in the Charter was essentially over and my husband took over.” (Dana)

On the other hand, as dissident activities were realized in the family, in the private sphere as described earlier, women were still in contact with dissent, they could participate in it to some extent. Mainly women living in cities, which were centers of dissent, or in proximity to these centers stayed in touch. But their primary role was that of childcare and maintaining the household, even in those cases when both partners were active in the opposition.

I could write in the evening, at night when the kids were asleep. Daytime I spent caring for the garden, the house, it’s still my lifestyle that I do not go out of the house too much as I didn’t used to, even today when I could go, I’m not going because I was never used to it. I had to cook for a lot of people, I had to work for a lot of people and teach them [she had five children before 1989]. (Barbara)

The embeddedness of dissident activities in the private sphere meant that women not only stayed in touch with events but also that a wider dissident group did not “forget” them. It was beneficial mainly at the time when their male partners were imprisoned – women could assume their duties.

Since 1978, since the second year of the Charter, we began to publish information about the Charter. It was a three-week period and at the end a two-week period. [...] He [her husband] then was imprisoned for a few years, so then I published it when he was in prison. (Andrea)

Being a mother was a crucial moment also in respect to the possibility of being imprisoned; one-third of the women from the presented sample of twenty-one interviews did end up being sentenced. Five of them were young women, unmarried, without children, two were mothers. Despite the fact that this conclusion cannot be generalized, it implies that women did not want to risk and endanger the family by being a “heroine”, they rather developed strategies that protected them, their children and families and hence also their activities against the regime.<sup>34</sup> Younger women without families had not yet developed such strategies or developed them only partially.

The other side of the coin has to be taken into account as well, namely, the attitude of the repressive apparatus of the ruling regime. Generally speaking, they built on the stereotype that a woman “belongs” in the home and also on a sort of underestimation of women abilities and activities in dissent, which could serve as their “protection” against the most severe punishments (often it

34 ŠIKLOVÁ, “Podíl českých žen na samizdatu a opoziční činnosti v Československu v období tzv. normalizace v letech 1969–1989“, 42.

was a successful strategy). However, in many cases maternity was used against women, to blackmail or intimidate them – that they would not be able to take care of their children, that their children would be left without their mother etc. In reality, especially in the second half of the 1980s when the political situation began to slowly change, mothers were not imprisoned as often, the threat was not as severe as before:

It's always good to be ready for the worst, though it was not too much [probable], they all said it was not very likely they would imprison a woman and mother. That was not the case anymore at that time. But, for sure, I prepared myself mentally that this [imprisonment] could happen. So, I thought if I could cope with the situation, if the family could. I needed to be sure that all members of our family would accept it, would take care of everything instead of me, that of one would blame me. I felt a responsibility, of course. (Dana)

When women prepared themselves and their family life for the possibility of their absence from home because of imprisonment, they made these preparations together with other women, not with their husband or partner. Concerning this practice, some authors find a parallel with the situation when a majority of men during the state socialism were unable to be the sole providers for their family and because of this their willingness and ability to care for the family (as it corresponded to the traditional father's role) dropped. They extend this interpretation to the idea of women as exclusive caregivers during socialism, a fact which could weaken men in their paternal role.<sup>35</sup>

I would add that in the interviews (with women in dissent as well as with other "normal" women living in socialist Czechoslovakia) generally, the topic of everyday work in the family, together with essentially necessary but often exhausting and boring duties when keeping up a household, are often not discussed extensively. Although this type of labor is both socially and economically necessary, it is not considered a "real" job, even by women who are primarily responsible for it. Perhaps the main reason why it is not a "real" job is that this work is unpaid.<sup>36</sup> As this sphere is underestimated by society, it "belongs" primarily to women.

This hierarchy within the family became highly evident in 1989. Women of dissent were in a position to become important figures in the November revolution events and in the subsequent transition of the society towards democracy and a market economy. Not only because of their previous activities in the opposition but also because of a lack of professionals at that

35 HYNKOVÁ, "Tiché hrdinky" *Charty 77: genderovanost českého disentu*, 49–50; Alena WAGNEROVÁ, „Emancipace a vlastnictví“, *Sociologický časopis* Vol. 31, 1/1995, 81.

36 Claire M. RENZETTI – Daniel J. CURRAN, *Ženy, muži a společnost*, Praha, Karolinum, 2003, 231.

time who would not be closely associated with the pre-November regime.<sup>37</sup> Thus in the period following the first democratic elections, women of dissent occupied various positions, either in the Civic Forum (Občanské fórum<sup>38</sup>) or in the Federal Assembly etc. (a reflection of their further career is beyond the scope of this paper). But very often those women were not "allowed" to participate actively in the emerging civil society because of motherhood; which influenced also their further chances to participate in the public sphere:

Because I had three children, my husband assumed an imaginary relay baton, so I had the information from him, he was everywhere, and I was by the TV set. And he was in the right place. (Dana)

I always spent those great moments with the kids. I went to some events, but I was so limited... My husband went to Prague in the autumn, he did not even know where I would give birth to our daughter, he was in the Civic Forum, he was in Prague. [...] He went there just in November, he got up and left us, so he went through all the great things from the beginning. (Barbara)

During that time he [my husband] borrowed a television set for me from some lady, a terribly nice lady, a black and white television, so I could at least watch it [November 1989 and the subsequent events] on that television. So the TV was running almost all the time, I played with the kids on the carpet and watched the TV and I was crying sometimes, I remember, I regretted so much that I did not experience the atmosphere in Prague. (Hana)

What do all these memories and life stories reveal about the topic of gender relationships and hierarchies prevailing in the Czech dissident movement? They represent further confirmation of the previous findings on gender hierarchies, where women mostly occupied "serving" positions and were the "workers" of the dissent as Jiřina Šiklová writes.<sup>39</sup> Based on previous works and these findings there is no doubt that the traditional structure of the division of labor was transferred from the general "normalization" space to the dissident movement. In spite of the fact that women did not reflect upon it (at least consciously) and stressed a common "enemy", the ruling communist regime acted as a unifying element between women and men. One woman

37 Jiří SUK, "Politické hry s „nedokončenou revolucí": Účtování s komunismem v čase Občanského fóra a jeho rozpadu", in *Rozdělení minulosti*, (ed.) Adéla GJURIČOVÁ – Michal KOPEČEK – Petr ROUBAL – Jiří SUK, Praha, Knihovna Václava Havla, 2011, 30–32.

38 Občanské fórum, a political movement that arose two days after the beginning of the Velvet Revolution in Prague as a broad, spontaneous platform of independent civic activities. Later it became politically oriented to the right.

39 ŠIKLOVÁ, "O ženách v disentu", 204–207; ŠIKLOVÁ, „Podíl českých žen na samizdatu a opoziční činnosti v Československu v období tzv. normalizace v letech 1969–1989“, 39–44.

even perceived feminist issues as “non-political” ones. This statement can be situated also within the later East–West feminist debates of the 1990s and conflicts concerning Western lectures [...] which missed the Czech context.<sup>40</sup>

I got to an international book fair in Montreal, but there were only female authors. It was so *apolitical*, there were *only feminists*. [...] It was just about the women being somewhat at risk as writers. [...] But they did not even understand our oppression. [...] For them the essential topic was that women were oppressed by men. [...] They still asked us what, “Is there a women’s movement in your country?” What could be a women’s movement here? The woman in Czechoslovakia had other problems. To get some meat at all, standing in queues everything... they did not understand us. (Barbara, emphasis Lenka Krátká)

However, it should be pointed out and stressed that some women in the dissident movement did become also actively engaged actors – because of their desire for freedom, their courage and effort to do something for this freedom. Women, for example, comprised one third of Charter 77 spokespersons, one of the most visible and most sanctioned and punished positions. Among other activities, they constituted one third of the Committee for Unjustly Prosecuted People [Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných] created one year after the Charter with the aim of documenting and witnessing politically motivated persecution. And there were also women whose activities represented a direct confrontation with the ruling power, as one of them, whose activities in dissent developed independently on her husband, remembers:

Within a year I went to political activities [...] and we started writing to various state authorities, alerting them about the situation in the army and asking for changes in the law. [...] Well, I never stopped being involved in public affairs. (Jana)

Despite the substantial contribution of women to dissident activities, the narratives discussed here prove that the majority of women interiorized the privileged role of male actors in politics, thus undermining their own importance as political actors. When I return to the initial research question if the dissident movement, in subverting the ruling communist power, also subverted gender order in society, the answer is: the gendered division of labor in society and gender inequalities were reproduced within the dissident movement. And this inequality was (and still is) unconscious.

There was no discrimination in the Charter. Gender has not played a

40 Veronika WÖHRER, “Border Crossers. Gender Discourses Between ‘East’ and ‘West’”, in *Gender and the (Post) “East” and “West” Divide*, (ed.) Mihaela FRUNZĂ – Theodora-Eliza VĂCĂRESCU, Cluj – Napoca, Limes Publication, 61–79.

role, and I do not even remember that it has ever been the subject of discussion.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, even women actively participating in dissent evinced a somatization of male domination and symbolic violence as described by Pierre Bourdieu. In this conception a controlled person (in this case a woman) is forced to recognize the dominance and superiority of a controlling person (here a man) because she has at her disposal only the tools of knowledge which are inherently an adopted form of this domination for reflecting on their relationship.<sup>42</sup> Thus it is essential to further address and study women’s irreplaceable role in dissent, both as “supporters” and as active policymakers.

41 Helena KLÍMOVÁ, “Potřebovala jsem něco dělat, abych si nepřipadala jako srab“, *Ženy v disentu*, <http://zenyvdisentu.soc.cas.cz/aktuality/helena-klimova-potrebovala-jsem-neco-delat-abych-si-nepripadala-jako-srab#.Wc6H3IS0PGg>, accessed 2017-09-29.

42 Pierre BOURDIEU, *Nadvláda mužů*, Praha, Karolinum 2000.



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## Sažetak

### VIDLJIVA I NEVIDLJIVA ULOGA ŽENA U ČEŠKOJ BUNI TIJEKOM 70TIH I 80TIH

Lenka KRÁTKÁ

U Čehoslovačkoj, slično kao i u drugim socijalističkim državama Središnje i Istočne Europe u drugoj polovici 20 stoljeća, razne protivne/disidentske grupacije djelovale su s ciljem suprotavljanja i rušenja službenih komunističkih režima (disidenti su se primjerice služili tiskanjem i distribucijom pamfleta ili organizacijom protesta i peticija). Uz pomoć 21 intervjua sa ženama članicama češkog otpora, ovaj rad analizira temeljne rodne veze i moguće stereotipe te hijerarhije unutar pokreta otpora u Čehoslovačkoj tijekom 70tih te glavnine 80tih godina. Rad potvrđuje potpurnu „nevidljivu” ulogu žena u ovoj sferi, ali također ukazuje na njihovo aktivno sudjelovanje u djelovanjima otpora.