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**WOMEN AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF  
EASTERN EUROPE**

BY PIETRA LETTIERI

The collapse of communism in 1989 has created an economic revolution that has negatively impacted women. Countries in Eastern Europe have faced similar problems in the aftermath of communism. These difficulties include: transitioning from a centrally planned economy; switching from a single political regime; and overall social and economic chaos.<sup>1</sup> The events of 1989 ushered in a decade of transition in Eastern Europe that involved changing from a state-run economy to a market economy, through the process of privatization.<sup>2</sup>

Privatization may be defined as "a process of socio-economic transformation of the foundation of socialist-centralized economies by means of transferring state assets and state enterprises to the private sector and thereby resulting in fundamental changes in ownership relationships in the spheres of production and distribution of material welfare."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this process

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<sup>1</sup> Kirsten Storin Doty, *Economic Legal Reforms as a Necessary Means for Eastern European Transition into the Twenty-First Century*, 33 INT'L LAW. 189 (Spring 1999).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

often causes great tensions and hardship through the redistribution of income, wealth, and power.<sup>4</sup> Women, who have theoretically been viewed as equal to their male counterparts under the communist ideology, have suffered a negative impact to their "equality" from the efforts of privatization.<sup>5</sup>

In a report issued in September of 1999 by UNICEF, researchers found that the living standard of women throughout the former Soviet bloc has deteriorated.<sup>6</sup> "Of the 25 million jobs lost since the collapse of communism, 14 million were held by women."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the change to the Russian market economy has been marked by state-tolerated discrimination against women in the labor market.<sup>8</sup> For example, in 1995 classified newspaper ads openly requested attractive applicants, including the phrase "bez kompleksa," meaning without complexes. This phrase meant that applicants must be willing to sleep with their bosses.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, the non-profit group Women, Law and Development International ("WLDI") conducted a year long research project entitled "Women's Rights Under Privatization" to study such consequences of economic change on women in the countries of Bulgaria, Ukraine, Poland, and Russia.<sup>10</sup> This study

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Cullen, 'You Can't Just Blow Up Communism' Change Slow in Central, East Europe Countries, BOSTON GLOBE, Dec. 19, 1999, available in 1999 WL 30402585.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth M. Schneider, Martina Vandenberg, *Markets and Women's International Human Rights*, 25 BROOK. J. INT'L L. 141 (Apr. 1999).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *The Consequences of Privatization on Women: WLDI Publishes Country and Synthesis Reports* (visited Mar. 15, 2000)

reiterated the fact that women are disproportionately enduring the negative consequences of privatization compare to men<sup>11</sup>WLDI publishes reports detailing findings from each country, and also presented its research during the Association of Women in Development (AWID) Conference in November of 1999.<sup>12</sup> Brief samples of the findings are detailed below.

As noted earlier, the study showed women in Russia have faced severe discrimination. Among a survey of 225 enterprises in 14 Russian cities it was found that: 50 percent of surveyed manager stated that they fired mostly or only women; 45 percent of managers are inclined to hire only men; there are many situation of unlawful firing of pregnant women, women on maternity leave, and women with small children; and women are frequently forced into low paid, unstable industries such as food service, chemicals, and health care.<sup>13</sup> To make matters worse, a history of government without accountability has left laws difficult to enforce and women skeptical about remedying their social issues through organized action<sup>14</sup>

The transition to capitalism has been especially difficult in the Ukraine, where the old totalitarian system provided for its citizens in almost all aspects of life.<sup>15</sup> The government essentially withdrew all of its social support without providing for alternative means of assistance including training

<<http://www.wldi.org/private.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Women's Rights in the Privatization Process; Problems, National Policies, and Attitudes in Russia* (visited Mar. 15, 2000)

<<http://www.wldi.org/private.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

and increased wages. The WLDI study found 80 percent of unemployed persons are women; 26.8 percent of managers hired mostly men; 29 percent of managers said they released mostly women when they laid off personnel; and the private sector tends to discriminate against women over the age of thirty who are looking for work.<sup>16</sup>

The problems faced by women in these and other evolving democracies took decades to create and will not subsequently be resolved overnight. With the continued efforts and assistance of developed democracies such as the United States, combined with the initiatives of such groups as WLDI, the social evils befalling women in Eastern Europe will slowly be resolved.

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.*