

Topic: Economic and Social Effects on Women in Lithuania During Transition

I. Background Information:

UNICEF recently reported that the situation of women in post-communist countries has spiraled downward since the collapse of communism, with increasing joblessness and abuse and deteriorating social services.¹ Many women in these countries are not only experiencing discrimination in the workplace, but also in the domestic sphere. This situation can be seen in Lithuania, a small nation of just under four million people.

Lithuania is a predominately Catholic country located on the Baltic Sea. For fifty years it was an occupied republic of the former Soviet Union (FSU). Following independence in 1990, its transformation began from that of a Soviet political and economic structure and way of life to a fully democratic and market-based system. The changes that came as a result of this transformation continue to affect the general population, and they have especially had a profound effect on Lithuanian women.

Lithuania's transition has led to many social and economic problems, such as growing unemployment, inflation, a decline in real wages, and general economic insecurity.² It has also led to increased domestic violence against women, as well as the added burden of supporting families after many men (and women) lost jobs due to the cessation of government industrial subsidies.

While during Soviet times women were assured liberation through increased opportunities in education, employment, and political representation, the reality is that communism failed to eliminate patriarchy. Moreover, Lithuania's current transition to market economy and democracy has not had any positive effects on this reality – it has only succeeded in degrading many women in new ways (i.e., through pornography and beauty contests).³

Though Lithuania is more detached from the other former Soviet republics (it has not joined the CIS, rather has submitted an application for EU membership) and more western-oriented (as it was while part of the USSR), the commonality of its Soviet experience has ensured that these aforementioned changes are very similar to what is happening throughout Russia and other parts of the FSU.

As unemployment in Lithuania continues to rise and the economic situation becomes more and more uncertain, many women there are finding themselves being discriminated against. According to a recent report based on a 1994 survey, most Lithuanians today “prescribe labor force participation based on reproductive roles.”⁴ There is a growing sentiment that appears to place child rearing above a woman's career. Moreover, a relatively new phenomenon is that Lithuanians believe “women with preschool children should not work outside the home.”⁵ Moreover, since 1990, a slogan has been popularized, based on declining birth rates: “Return Women to the Family.”

In general, over the past decade many changes have occurred in Lithuanian society that have had a tremendous effect on women. Thus, it is my desire to conduct thorough research this summer that will allow me to accurately depict what the impact of these changes have been, with particular focus on the women in the Taurage region of Lithuania.

II. Purpose of Research:

Much attention is being given to the countries of Eastern/Central Europe (ECE) and the former Soviet Union (FSU) – the questions surrounding their fate(s) are many: Will these countries be able to

“successfully” transform their economies from socialist/communist to free markets? What will be the end result of their attempts at democracy? Indeed, the economic transformation that each of these regions is experiencing is not only a case of “history in the making,” but also is a monumental occurrence that is having (and will continue to have) numerous affects on countries throughout the world.

The events happening in the transitioning economies of ECE and the FSU are not so entirely different from what is happening throughout the rest of the developing world. For instance, governments in both are implementing (or have implemented) similar macroeconomic policies, mainly due to pressure from multilateral organizations like the IMF and World Bank, which have had enormous effects on the people in these countries. In this sense, I am intrigued with the connection that can be made when one looks at the similarities between what people in ECE/FSU are facing during this transitional period, and what people in other developing countries are facing (or have faced). In particular, it is the women in these countries that experience the most deleterious effects from economic transformation.

To my knowledge there are no studies in existence that measure and/or document the effects of the transition on women in Lithuania (though there are studies that have been performed in other countries, such as Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic, to name a few). In light of this fact, I propose to conduct research that will *document the social, economic, and political effects of the transition on women in the Taurage region of Lithuania*. [Due to time constraints (only three months in-country), I am compelled to focus my research on only one region rather than the entire country. However, I believe this will be a somewhat representative sample because Taurage is a fairly representative region when compared to the other eleven regional centers in Lithuania. This is not to discount the fact that there *are* notable economic, social, and political differences between Lithuania’s twelve regions; however, on a broad scale, I anticipate that the results I find in Taurage would most likely reflect similar situations in other regions.]

I am familiar with the Taurage region, having lived and worked there for three years (1993-95) as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer. I will be able to utilize personal and professional connections in order to conduct a thorough research sample.

Specifically, the scope of my research will focus on aspects of the women’s lives, as described below. The following list is only meant to be a preliminary guideline, and it must be stressed that my research will not be limited only to the topics given:

- (Access to) Education:
 - Women make up the majority of secondary/university students in Lithuania – for women in/from the Taurage region, has this fact eased their entry into the “new” market-based labor market?
 - What is the current focus of secondary school curriculum in Taurage, and how does it address gender? (this will be representative of the country as a whole, since educational policies and curriculums come from the Ministry of Education in Vilnius)
- Women’s Health Issues:
 - What health programs are currently available for women in Taurage?
 - What specific health problems are women in this region experiencing? (have these problems changed since before 1990?)
 - If there are new health programs available, are they an improvement over those in existence before 1990? Is it affordable?
 - Do the women in Taurage have *equal* access to healthcare?

- Social:
 - Is there a Women's Movement in Taurage region? Is it social, political, and/or economic in nature?
 - What other organizations currently exist that support women in the region?
 - What successes have these organizations and/or movements accomplished in the region? What specific projects/programs have they implemented?
 - How "powerful" are they in making a change in the lives of women?
 - Is there a local social (or religious) movement towards putting women back into the household? (population issue)
- Religion
 - How does the Catholic Church relate to women's issues in this region? (i.e., health, social roles, etc.)
- Labor Force Participation
 - Does a sexual division of labor exist in Taurage region? If so, to what extent?
 - How have women in rural areas been affected by the transition?
 - Approximately how many women are participating in the "informal" economy? In what activities?
- Political Participation
 - Since independence, are women in the region more or less active in politics?
 - What kinds of barriers to entry exist now, as opposed to pre-independence?
 - How many women are in local government? And in what positions?

III. Expected Findings:

Overall, I believe that the lives of many women in this region have changed in a negative way since 1990. While there are, of course, a number of women in this region who have *prospered* since independence (economically, socially, and/or politically), I anticipate that the majority of women have not. The results of my research, I believe, will support this contention. In general, the effects of trade liberalization, privatization, and fiscal and monetary restraint (all policies sanctioned by the IMF and World Bank) have led to higher prices, higher unemployment and more poverty. Many women in Lithuania, I believe, have been deleteriously affected by these negative trends: for instance, the demands on their personal and professional time have increased as they try to compensate for the loss of social services and family income. In terms of *specific* outcomes from my research, I do not feel that I am in a position at this time to estimate what these might be.

The women in Taurage region have historically been very resourceful and flexible, in particular when faced with difficult circumstances. The individual and collective responses they have had to their country's transition experience so far are, no doubt, also resourceful and flexible. With that in mind, I would expect to find extremely strong-willed women who have found creative ways to deal with the situation at hand. Women in Lithuania have traditionally been able to make the best of difficult situations, and I gather that the current period of economic transformation is no different in that women will be able to survive. My intent is to find out what the specific circumstances are, and how they have dealt with them in order to improve their current and future lives.

IV. Methodologies:

I anticipate conducting research based on three main methodologies: individual interviews, panel discussions, and statistical research. Individual interviews will take place with women throughout the Taurage region (both urban and rural) who are between the ages of 30 and 55, and who are from a variety of economic and social classes. The reason I have chosen the 30-35 age group is based on the fact that women below the age of 30 were not in the labor force in 1990, when independence occurred. Therefore, I would like to focus my research on women who were at least out of university, and who were working in 1990. The cut-off of age 55 is based on the retirement age of women in Lithuania. Research on women above the age of 55 should be set aside for another project. Pensioners indeed have their own sets of problems that stem from the transition. While I do not want to exclude female pensioners completely, I do not intend to focus on them at this time.

Plans for panel discussions (focus groups) are currently in the midst of being developed. The director of the Taurage Women's Center has generously offered assistance in finding women who are interested in participating in panel discussions (as well as those who would be interested in participating in the individual interviews). The discussions in both will revolve around the topics of the Lithuanian economy (in particular, the local economic situation and how it has affected them), education, religion, politics, etc. The focus groups will include women from the region (both urban and rural, between the ages of 30-55), and I expect that each session will last approximately 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes. I am currently acquiring the necessary skills to facilitate such panels in the course of my research.

Finally, I will conduct straight data (statistical) research by making several trips to Kaunas and Vilnius (the capital city). The Lithuanian Statistical Department is located in Vilnius, and Kaunas houses the Women's Pedagogical University, which keeps statistical data on women at its Women's Studies Department (with whom I am currently making contacts).

¹ Olson, Elizabeth, "Free Markets Leave Women Worse Off," New York Times, September 23, 1999.

² LaFont, Suzanne, Women in Transition: Voices from Lithuania, 1998, New York: State University of New York Press, pg. 4.

³ Pavilioniene, Marija Ausrine, "Women's Rights-Human Rights," Lithuania: Women in the Changing Society, Vilnius: United Nations Development Program, pg. 35.

⁴ LaFont, Suzanne, Women in Transition: Voices from Lithuania, New York: State University of New York Press, pg. 48.

⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 54.