

How and Why Do Czech Women Organize? (Altos, Sopranos, and a Few Discordant Voices)

by Eva Hauser

À partir du répertoire récemment publié des groupes de femmes de la Tchécoslovaquie, l'auteure donne un aperçu des

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groupements, des organismes et des mouvements de femmes qui ont vu le jour en République tchèque depuis 1989.

In the Fall of 1994, I edited a booklet called *Altý a soprány* (Altos and Sopranos), which presents a survey of contemporary women's organizations in the Czech Republic. The book was published in December 1994 by the Prague Gender Studies Centre and is based on the work of a group of seven women journalists, each of whom contacted and interviewed some of the 33 women's organizations included. Although some of the groups listed refused to be interviewed (through lack of time or lack of interest), and although we probably missed some groups which are not based in Prague, overall this survey is fairly representative, and gives a clear idea of the main problems and issues facing Czech women today.

Professional associations

First of all, there are a number of organizations that bring women together on a more or less professional basis. The most characteristic of these is the Association of Businesswomen and Women Managers (*Asociace podnikatelek a manažerek/APM*). APM helps women to start in business, organizes training, and offers advice. It is a member of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women.

According to their president:

Our state, which is so benevolent towards big enterprises, behaves harshly towards middle-sized and small enterprises. This especially hits businesswomen, because apart from their job, they also have to fulfil their other roles. Our legislature, for the time being, hasn't done anything at all to advantage those women

managers who simultaneously have to take care of children. (Prague Gender Studies Centre 29-30)

(Note that the speaker has no doubt about the fact that mothers, rather than parents, are responsible for the care of children.)

Another example of a professional group is the Women's Club of the Czech Union of Scientific and Technological Societies (*Klub žen Českého svazu vědeckotechnických společností/CVTS*), which was founded in 1975 and had already encountered a lot of conflict with the state and with the official Communist Czech Union of Women because its members demanded that the documents of the U.N. (especially those concerning the rights of women and children) be respected. They made the first translations of all U.N. documents concerning women's rights into Czech. Today their main concern is the creation of a new Law on the Family (or, in the event that the old Law on the Family is repealed without a unitary successor, by the laws that will replace it). Their leading personality is Kvetoslava Korínková, the only female minister in the federal government of Czechoslovakia during 1990-92, who today finds herself in opposition to many of the concepts of our conservative government (self-confessed "Thatcherites" to a man).

Another professional group is *Koza Nostra*, also known as the First Women's Artistic Group (*První ženská výtvarná skupina*), an association of three women artists and one art critic, which tries to draw attention to women's problems by means of humorously shocking the public. The name is a play on words, since apart from the similarity to "Cosa Nostra," "koza" means "boob" in Czech. The group came into existence in 1990, primarily to organize collaborative exhibitions of their work, but in 1993 they also set up a foundation to buy mammography equipment for preventive diagnosis of breast cancer. Many women die only because of late diagnosis of the disease and there is an acute shortage of equipment.

In the catalogue of their show, they claim:

We want to demonstrate that women and men think with a brain that is ultimately of a comparable capacity, that dividing activities into those which are 'male' and 'female' is nonsense, and that if a woman wants to be respected in her field, she must work much harder than an equally gifted man. (qtd. in Hauser)

Humanitarian groups

Another category of women's organizations in the

Czech Republic are those dealing with humanitarian aid or women's safety.

The White Circle of Safety (*Bily kruh bezpeck*) wasn't originally a women's organization at all. Its members want to prevent crime and support its victims, who are usually women, children, and the elderly, and so in practice they tend to concentrate mainly on women. They organize consciousness-raising sessions for victims of rape and violence, training courses in women's self-defense, and they provide help and advice from physicians, psychologists, and lawyers to victims of crime.

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Bliss Without Risk (*Rozkos bez rizika*) is an organization that cares for the interests of prostitutes. It provides education, specialist help, and support in critical situations. It is especially concerned with the prevention of AIDS and venereal disease, and it cooperates with similar organizations in the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland.

The Club of Single Mothers (*Klub osamelých maminek/KOM*) is a group of single or divorced mothers, many of them living in very difficult psychological or material conditions. KOM provides them with the services of a physician and a psychologist, a childcare center, a safehouse for women who are at risk of violence, and it organizes spare-time activities like walks, trips, games, and parties for children. In the interview that they gave *Alty a soprány*, a member of their committee said that "the pressure of the communist regime led people into a condition of passivity. Even today a lot of people sit around waiting for the state to solve their problems... Women must learn to be responsible for themselves, to prepare their own activities, to listen and to understand each other, to accept education and requalification, and to raise their self-consciousness. Our pretty, educated, smart women are not self-confident enough" (Prague Gender Studies Centre 58).

Political groups

One of the curiosities of the Czech political scene during 1990-93 was the existence of the Political Party of Women and Mothers (*Politická strana žen a matek*), founded and led by Alena Valterová. Although it received a certain amount of attention from the media, it never succeeded in building up a real base of popular support, and it disbanded after barely three years of activity. Personally, I must admit I couldn't identify with part of their rhetoric, such as their demand to make conditions for

divorce more difficult or their plans to forbid marriage under the age of 18 and to limit the total number of marriages that a single individual would be permitted in their lifetime. Somehow these suggestions seemed rather naive, and I felt that they didn't strike at the real problems of society, so much as their most obvious consequences.

Today, there exist several political groups that deal with women's rights and problems, some of them from quite opposite angles.

Democratic Alternative (*Demokratická alternativa*) is a group of women politicians who are by their own definition "liberal and conservative" (Prague Gender Studies Centre 40). They want mainly to influence the Czech legislature and lobby parliament regarding the content of new laws.

Christian Women (*Křestanské ženy*) is an umbrella organization of political and humanitarian women's groups who are focused on traditional values and the family. They stress the need for mutual care, which is very positive in our society because under communism nobody cared about anybody; they demand better conditions for people with large families and for mothers staying at home with their children; and they campaign for a less tolerant attitude towards divorce and abortion.

Left-Wing Clubs of Women (*Levicové kluby žen*) is another umbrella organization, bringing together the women's sections of the various political parties that have developed out of the former Communist Party. The single most influential group in the umbrella is probably still the Women's Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komise žen při Ústředním výboru Komunistické strany Čech a Moravy*), but they are joined by about 35 smaller local organizations. Their members are mostly concerned with legislation and the education of their members.

On the non-Communist left, Social Democratic Women (*Sociálně demokratické ženy/SDŽ*), the women's organization of the Czech Social Democratic Party is a particularly strong and active group. The Social Democrats themselves are today the most plausible left-wing party in the parliamentary opposition to our conservative regime. They are systematically training women for political work, and the vice-chair of the party, Petra Buzková, has the distinction of being the most popular woman politician in the Czech Republic. As one of their members observed:

women have not had, and unfortunately still don't have, freedom of choice as regards their lifestyle... The measures that have been taken here in support of working women tend to be considered as "advantages for women," and not as the necessary conditions for their real equality. (Prague Gender Studies Centre 99)

This perception of being "advantaged" was, incidentally, typical of the communists: "What shall we do for our women? Let's give them maternity leave!" Nobody seemed

to realize, or wanted to realize, that maternity leave is a measure which is primarily advantageous to the children and the family as a whole, rather than to the woman as such—that by enabling a woman to bring up her family at all you are not supporting her in her hobby.

Ecological initiatives

A fourth category of women's organizations are the grass-roots women's ecological groups that have sprung up since 1989. Most of them have a local character, e.g. the North Bohemian Mothers (*Severoceske matky*), the South Bohemian Mothers (*Jihoceske matky*), and the Prague Mothers (*Prazske matky*). The goals of the Prague Mothers are, to restore a civic attitude of the public towards their own community, to restore the environment and the relationship of people to nature. "People should care for life and living beings, instead of trying to rule nature" (Prague Gender Studies Centre 84).

Though I sympathize with the aims of this group, and am also member of their organization, I feel that the environmentalism of these women is usually bound up with Christianity and traditionalism, rather than taking a progressive, alternative, or even left-wing approach of organizations such as the Green Party, ecological activists like Greenpeace or even the New Age movement, the New Pagans, etc. Such movements do exist here, but they don't include exclusively women's groups.

Looking at the example of the Prague Mothers, one realizes just how important motherhood really is in Czech society. If you speak out on an issue only as a woman, you don't impress the authorities or the public very much. If, however, you speak out as a mother, you may be suspected of being emotional or incompetent, but at the same time the people you address feel guilty. I am not sure whether this "cult of motherhood" is as effective everywhere in the world or whether it is specific to the Slavic countries.

Lesbian organizations

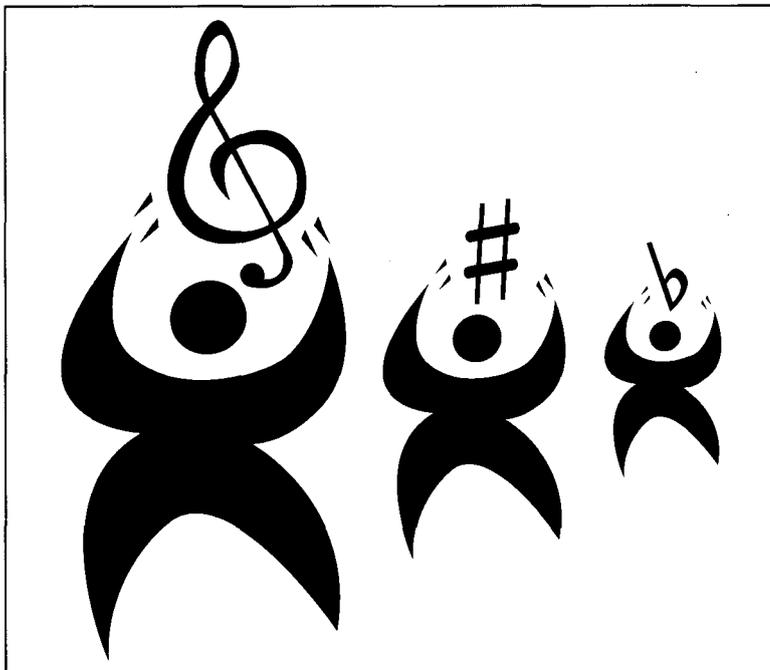
Although homosexuality was not a criminal offence in

communist Czechoslovakia (it was decriminalized in 1961), in practice, prior to 1989, lesbians and gay men never dared to show their sexual orientation in public. It came as a considerable shock to Czech society (including myself) when gay women and men started to be more "visible," and I started to meet women who openly admitted they were lesbians. This "visibility" of homosexuals is something that is still very new here.

The two largest Czech lesbian organizations are *L-klub Lambda Praha*, which is open to "homosexually-oriented women and their sympathisers," and *Promluv* (Speak

Out), which describes itself as an "open association of lesbian and bisexual women" (Prague Gender Studies Centre 89). *Promluv* is active in spreading information about lesbian and bisexual lifestyles among the widest possible public and publishes an alternative journal of the same name.

Public opinion polls show that the Czech public is sympathetic to the notion of homosexuals having the



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possibility of entering into officially recognised "registered partnerships," but they are opposed to them adopting children. People are somehow obsessed with the idea that children must grow up in a "normal" family with both a mum and a dad. This could again be something like the "cult of motherhood," a certain feeling of the sacredness of the traditional family.

Hobby groups

A final category of women's organizations are those which might be classified as "hobby groups," and strangely, the formerly Communist Czech Union of Women (*Cesky svaz zen*), which used to enjoy a monopoly as the only national communist women's organization, falls into that category. Today, the Union defines itself as a cultural and social (not political) organization, and it has a tremendous number of members in small towns and villages. The activities of its clubs concentrate on motherhood, the family, traditional women's hobbies, and sometimes they also discuss topics such as the position of women in the workplace. The Union is probably the richest women's organization in Czech Republic, and women from the

other organizations are extremely critical of it for this. Why has it been permitted to keep almost all the money, buildings and property of the former Communist Union of Women?

Another example of a "hobby organization" is *Vesna*, a very traditional Moravian women's club, which was founded in 1871 to improve the education of Czech women. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was responsible for founding a whole series of schools for young women and did a lot of cultural and social work. It was abolished in 1939 (by the Nazis) and then again in 1955 (by the communists), renewing its activities in 1991. *Vesna* has now opened a family school for girls and are organizing educational events, art exhibitions, and hobbies, mainly concentrating on "family values."

Vesna's members have claimed that:

the communist regime enslaved women. It forced them to cope with many functions in parallel, and at the same time it suppressed their feminine and motherly functions. Women lost their ability to gain sincere pleasure from their child and its development. (Prague Gender Studies Centre 106)

Their goals are "to return women their self-confidence and their will to be active in civic and political life." Speaking about the historically new situation of women on prolonged maternity leave (until the child is three, under Czech law), *Vesna* has argued that "during this period, many women live through an economic and, most of all, a social crisis." It wants more respect for mothers, who stay at home for several years with their babies. It also wants to give back these mothers their lost dignity and make them more active and self-confident.

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Working on the compilation of *Alty a soprány* led me to start thinking about whether there are any recognizable trends or patterns in the form of Czech women's activities.

According to Jirina Siklová, sociologist and former dissident, who is now a professor at Charles University, sociological research on many problems was simply not carried out during the period of "really-existing socialism" (Prague Gender Studies Centre 7). Certain questions were not even asked, so that now we don't have the basic data for establishing what has actually happened since 1989.

Visitors from the West often ask why there is no women's political party in Czech Republic? Why are there no women in our government? Why are women not concerned that welfare arrangements (like childcare centers and free abortion) are gradually being cut? Why don't women play a greater role in our public life?

At first sight, it seems our women are more and more oppressed. However, western visitors soon find out that Czech women are in most cases very strong on a personal

level, and their economic self-sufficiency under communism has given them a relatively high self-esteem. Siklová has found that women represent one third of new entrepreneurs and new owners of private businesses, which is quite a respectable proportion, and the employment of women has dropped since 1989 by only 3 per cent, which means that women in fact prefer employment to being a housewife. Our unemployment so far has been really low (about 3 per cent), and women make up almost exactly one half of the unemployed.

The average woman's income is still about three quarters of an average man's, but women themselves believe that they are responsible for the household and the children, and as a result they don't accept more demanding jobs. For example, while women make up 54 per cent of our physicians, they take only eleven per cent of the most senior posts. This is not because women would not be allowed to take these jobs, but because they themselves don't want to accept them. They simply don't realize their lowered ambitions. This is also the reason why there are so few women in politics.

While I feel that many women in my environment are really very self-confident, as Jirina Siklová has pointed out, it is interesting that in the interviews so many of the speakers mention lowered self-esteem as one of the problems currently facing women in the Czech Republic (Prague Gender Studies Centre 58). This could in part be caused by the fact that the respondents speak for women whose self-confidence really has somehow been lowered (e.g. victims of violence, housewives, single mothers, or just overburdened women who can't fulfil all the roles that are required of them). However, it could also be caused by the fact that the self-confidence of our women is mostly limited to the framework of their families. Most women here are quite dominant in the context of their families, and the most frequent argument of Czech people against feminism is "why do we need feminism? Look how husbands are repressed by their wives!"

Many of the women interviewed yearned for a restoration of better relations among the people in their families, for more human bonding, both within the family and in the community at large. They hope to find this in the traditional model of the family. One cannot really wonder at this leap of logic, if one considers how women were forced into the position of an overburdened (and thus, of necessity, strong and independent) drudge during the communist era, while men, on the contrary, were forced to be passive and malleable, and were mostly frustrated in their work. Everybody—both men and women—lost a large part of their ability to be empathetic and to sympathize with other people, to discuss topics openly, to listen to others and to form their own opinions and moral judgements gradually. This need to restore the normal "human" patterns of communication and relations among people is so urgent that, for many women, it outweighs all other concerns, such as the higher salaries of men, the introduction of charges for abortions, and the closure of

daycare centers. A typical woman is much more concerned about the possibility that her children may grow up to be criminals, skinheads, or drug-addicts, than by the fact that her salary is lower than that of her more ambitious male colleague, who spends his evenings and weekends at the workplace.

Christian and conservative models of the family often stress what they perceive as the "natural" models of human behaviour: for a woman, it is "natural" to fulfil all the patriarchal expectations of the woman's role. It is her responsibility to return care, sensitivity, emotion, and empathy to our world. This is of course dangerous, but women themselves are often inclined to grasp their traditional feminine role and values, because they don't see any better alternative.

On the other hand, there are of course initiatives to enhance women's professional self-confidence. For example, the Motto publishing house concentrates on books advising women how to be successful in the workplace, how to build a career and how it is much better to be middle-aged than young. These books are very popular, and certainly in the Czech Republic there are a lot of women who do have professional ambitions that they are not willing to compromise on behalf of the family. But these women tend to belong to the younger generation, and the "motherly and conservative voices" of the older generations are still much louder.

The tendency for some of our women to confirm the patriarchal model of society is impressively demonstrated in an interview with the well-known woman psychologist, Vera Capponi (born 1946), who is currently vice-president of the Association of Marital and Family Counsellors of the Czech Republic. The interview was published recently in the political weekly, *Respekt*, which is considered to be a progressive and innovative publication.

In response to the interviewer's comment that there aren't any women in Czech politics, for example, Capponi gave the revealing reply, "I wouldn't want to go into politics. I have a child! Politics is a men's game..." (Hobstová). She went on to say that "for a man, the knowledge that he has a child is enough. That's why he can go into parliament. Not me. You can't take your children there. That is the biological distinction between the male and the female gender."

"After maternity leave is exhausted," she added, "either parent can choose to stay at home with the children. But what mother would leave her six-month-old child with her husband, so she can go to work? I wouldn't trust him!"

In response to the comment that "some women don't have a good position in the workplace and they feel it is unjust," Capponi answered, "that injustice is felt most strongly by women who are not capable enough..."

"I could protest against Euro-American patriarchal culture, but I don't want to. For me, the role of mother is more important than the role of a professional." She implied that if you are a mother (and if you are a woman, you can't be genuinely fulfilled in any other way), you can

wisely ignore all those silly masculine games like parliament, the government, politics, and a good job... She also said that, when her husband returns home after a month's travel abroad and goes immediately to the pub with his buddies, this is okay because men don't need to spend time with their wives and children. This already begins to look as if the worlds of men and women are almost completely separated here, which may be true. I feel a little sad about it.

My impression is however, that if any kind of feminism will take root in the Czech Republic at all, it will probably not accept the sharp division of people into "oppressed women" and "oppressive men," and will instead stress the common "humanity" of all people. This phenomenon—of humanity being more important than the distinctions of gender—is stressed in many documents produced by Czech women's initiatives, and it appears even in the name of one of them, New Humanity (*Nová Humanita*). New Humanity is a group of our leading women intellectuals, who seek to deal with the problems of subordination and dominance in our society, as well as of morality and communication. The leading personality of this group is our excellent woman writer, Alexandra Berková (some of whose work is also available in English).

As we were going to press, news arrived that an English-language edition of Alty a soprany was recently published by the Prague Gender Studies Centre, under the title Altos and Sopranos: A Pocketbook of Women's Organizations (edited by Laura Busheikin and Amy Koczak). The quotations and the page-references given here, however, are taken directly from the Czech edition. Readers who are interested in the English-language edition should contact: Nadace Gender Studies, Narodnj dum Smickov, Namesti 14. rijna 16, 150 00 Praha 5, Czech Republic.

English translation of the text by the author and Cyril Simsa.

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