

POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá / Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies

URL of the journal / URL časopisu: <http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk>

Author(s) / Autor(i): Kristína Papcunová
Article / Článok: "We Have Lost the Continuity of it...": Revisiting Historical Implications of the Contemporary Feminist Organizing in the Czech Republic
Publisher / Vydavateľ: Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov – UMB Banská Bystrica / Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – UMB Banská Bystrica
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2021.24.4.83-103>

Recommended form for quotation of the article / Odporúčaná forma citácie článku:

PAPCUNOVÁ, K. "We Have Lost the Continuity of it...": Revisiting Historical Implications of the Contemporary Feminist Organizing in the Czech Republic. In *Politické Vedy*. Vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 83-103. ISSN 1335 – 2741. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2021.24.4.83-103>

By submitting their contribution the author(s) agreed with the publication of the article on the online page of the journal. The publisher was given the author's / authors' permission to publish and distribute the contribution both in printed and online form. Regarding the interest to publish the article or its part in online or printed form, please contact the editorial board of the journal: politicke.vedy@umb.sk.

Poskytnutím svojho príspevku autor(i) súhlasil(i) so zverejnením článku na internetovej stránke časopisu *Politické vedy*. Vydavateľ získal súhlas autora / autorov s publikovaním a distribúciou príspevku v tlačenej i online verzii. V prípade záujmu publikovať článok alebo jeho časť v online i tlačenej podobe, kontaktujte redakčnú radu časopisu: politicke.vedy@umb.sk.

“We have lost the continuity of it...”: Revisiting historical implications of the contemporary feminist organizing in the Czech Republic¹

Kristína Papcunová*

ABSTRACT

Extensive research into the dynamics of the social movements has contributed significantly to the recognition that the political and geographic preconditions underlying the emergence of the feminist collective identity are important factors in the possibilities of feminist organizing. Therefore, the aim of the article was to analyse the intersection between political and personal, historical and contemporary aspects of narrating identity in the local context and to gain insight into how feminists reflect on their collective feminist identification in the light of the post-socialist history. The study builds on narrative interviews with 26 women, who reflect on the historical background of the Czech feminist movement in which they engage nowadays. The research results discuss distinctive features of post-socialist countries, e.g., non-activism, unwillingness to express committed consent in relation to feminist movement and its continuity, the negotiation of western and local feminism and limits of the construction of the collective identity. This article is intended to be a selective summary - linking theoretical concepts, which have been extensively discussed but have been not substantiated by practical statements, to the contemporary state of feminist organizing. My effort was to contribute to the debates on the specificity of women's experience in post-socialist societies and analyse the framework of how we think about historical implications of local feminism within the context of “western” feminism.

Key words: feminist movement, solidarity, feminism in the Czech Republic, post-socialist experience

Introduction

Women's movement is influential, but often overlooked part of the Czech past. Over the years, feminist activism has been challenging gender

* Mgr. Kristína Papcunová is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, nám. Jana Palacha 2, 116 38 Prague, Czech Republic, e-mail: kristina.papcunova@ff.cuni.cz.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2021.24.4.83-103>

¹ The study was supported by the grant SVV 2020 – 260556 realized at the Charles University, Faculty of Arts.

inequalities, influencing public culture and beliefs, and showing that it is crucial for pursuing a social change. Although feminist movement has changed structure and form, neither the movement nor the injustices that produced it have disappeared (Pelak, Taylor, Whittier, 1999). After more than three decades after the fall of the totalitarian regime, we can gradually notice significant changes in Czech gender culture: emergence of number of women's and feminist organization, institutionalization of gender studies program and academic scholarship, growing sensitivity to gender injustice in public and media discourse (Fojtová, 2016).

The specific historical background of feminism in the Czech Republic and generally in post-socialist societies was essential for the current situation. As **Fojtová** argues, top-bottom feature of socialist women's emancipation formed specific perspective through which Eastern European women approached feminism (Fojtová, 2016). In this article, therefore, I first outline the historical development of Czech women's and feminist organizing and activism before and after the transformation in 1989. In the next part, I focus on the development, which Czech society experienced in relation to state socialism and how has it affected the perception of women's movement. This paper builds on qualitative research and one of its goals was to reflect how feminists embrace the ideas of collective feminist organization in the relation to the post-socialist history. The ambition of the presented article is not to become an exhaustive study and a number of interesting aspects will only be outlined or even left aside, as a challenge for further research. This paper offers a comparison of claims made in literature in relation with the Czech feminist scene with the insights of twenty-six interviews. The analyses of the narratives revealed diverse perspective of the experiences of informants; to understand the experience of feminists, one must examine the historical and contemporary aspects of narrating identity. The experience of women, recorded and preserved as a memory, can inspire the individual, social and political activities of other generations of women and can be the source of their self-confidence and the necessary solidarity (Kiczková, 2000). Therefore, knowledge of the development of the local feminist movement has a great importance for forming a collective identity within feminist movement. Structural preconditions underlying the emergence of feminist collective mobilizations may vary with historical and geographic context (Pelak, Taylor, Whittier, 1999). Thus, if we want to understand the present situation and relationship of women and men in the Czech Republic, it is inevitable to take a brief look into the past and take into

the consideration the uniqueness of experience of the Czech society (Wagnerová, 2009).

1. The Czech women's movement between the ideologies

Cold reactions of the Czech society to feminist movement after the transformation in 1989 were partly influenced by the Czech tradition of the emancipation of women, which was incorporated into the national project of emancipation. **Simona Fojtová** reflects that this aspect is tied not only to the socialist period but also to the development of the early Czech women's movement in the 19th Century and to the Czech feminist movement during the First Republic (Fojtová, 2016).

The past of Czechoslovak women's movement is marked by the long tradition of the Czech women's service to the national cause. From its emergence and during 20th Century, women's movement in the region was significantly influenced by the subordination of women's aims to the interest of the whole nation, in which men were seen more allies rather than obstacles in women's equality (Wagnerová, 2009; Fojtová, 2016; Malečková, 2016). Women believed that the fight for the national rights had outweighed their conquest for equal rights, and they were convinced that their emancipatory demands will be more successful if they subordinate to the men in the fight for the rights of the Czech nation (Havelková, 2006). In 1905, the universal voting right for men was enacted, and at the same year the Czech women's movement came up with the requirement for equal voting right. Consequently, constitutional equality, including active and passive voting right for women, was established by the first Czechoslovak constitution of 1920 (ibid).

As **Jiřina Šiklová** argues, the relative cohesion between men and women is one of the specific factors inhibiting feminism (Šiklová, 1997). Over the years, Czech women did not consider themselves oppressed as much by patriarchy, as by common enemy: in the beginning of the 20th Century, the oppressive forces were represented by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, during World War II by German occupation and in the aftermath of the war, by Communist Party bureaucracy under the state socialism (Šiklová, 1997; Wagnerová, 2016). *"The Czechs, including Czech feminists, have thus tended to emphasize collaboration between men and women, rather than women's separate struggle for emancipation or other axes of struggle prospectively dividing the nation"* (Malečková, 2016, pp. 47). **Fojtová** points out, Czech nationalism not only

influenced the Czech women's perception of the fight for their rights, but also mitigated the relationship between Czech men and women (Fojtová, 2016). The role of men, especially their support of women in the fight for women's liberation and the perception of "one enemy" has alleviated the discrepancy between men and women. The idea of aligning of the women's rights with the Czech national interests is one of the specific features of the Czech feminist thinking that continued over the years: during World War II and German occupation and later, under state socialism (Wagnerová, 2016). After the onset of state socialism in 1948, which played crucial role in shaping and restricting the opportunities for civic organizing, feminism was condemned as „bourgeois“ and considered dangerous to the communist regime (Ciprová – Sokačová, 2009; Hašková – Uhde, 2016). While Czechoslovakia was undergoing period of political stagnation, Western Europe, the United States and Canada were witnessing the rise of second wave of feminism: struggling with reproductive rights, challenging sexual and economic exploitation or violence against women (Pelak – Taylor – Whittier, 1999). *“In the West, the second wave of feminism, as it emerged in the 1960s, was formed from the bottom-up, with feminist activists developing their positions, expressing their critiques of the status quo, and stating their demands for change”* (Wagnerová, 2016, pp. 78). **Wagnerová** considers as paradoxical that a nondemocratic, authoritarian socialist regime opened many opportunities to women, compared to Western democratic regimes during the same period (Wagnerová, 2016).

Socialism left behind a relatively high and un-reflected level of equality between men and women: legislatively guaranteed equality of men and women; access to education and labour market; women's statutory and economic independence from men (Wagnerová, 2009; Frýdlová, 2016). On the other hand, socialist form of women's emancipation served the political interests of the regime (Fojtová, 2016). The women's liberation was part of the political agenda of socialism from the outset in 1948, when women gradually received their "equal status" with men from the socialist state as part of a political program, a model of socialist emancipation (Šiklová, 1997; Wagnerová, 1999). While statutory and economic independence and social participation became core concepts of women's liberation in Western feminist movement, they were not seen as relevant goals for many Czech women after 1989 given that they had already achieved these goals under state socialism to a certain degree (Fojtová, 2016).

In her work about sexual liberation during 1945 – 1989, **Kateřina Lišková**

provides arguments supporting different perspective on the increased levels of gender equality under the state socialism, both in normative terms and in everyday lived practices (higher rate of employed and educated women) (Lišková, 2018). However, as Šiklová points out, during socialism the discussion on women's emancipation was reduced only to the integration into the production process because of the economic egalitarianism introduced from above, by political authorities (Šiklová, 1999). Havelková mentions the paradoxical nature of state-socialist emancipation, which had partly beneficial impact on the Czech women's social and economic status, but on the other hand, she argues that the state-led emancipation could be hardly considered an emancipation because of its fundamental suppression of individual autonomy by totalitarian regime (Havelková, 1999; 2006).

Despite several successes and a number of reforms that have undoubtedly improved the position of women (e.g., funded childcare, women's participation in the labour market, access to the education), no major changes took place in the social understanding of women's traditional roles as mothers and wives. Although, socialist model of emancipation has strongly influenced the position of women in the society and provided women with the opportunity to find self-realization at a labour market, it has not completely dealt with the gender stereotypes, discrimination, sexism or overburdening of women (Sokačová, 2009; Frýdlová, 2016). Under the state socialism, this modernization of women's status happened, but it happened without any public debate or without the possibility of active response to these changes, because Czech society was isolated from an emergence of any new social movements, including feminism, that arose in the western societies after the World War II (Havelková, 1999). Considering that, the socialist model of emancipation was implemented after 1948: not as a movement but as a policy measure executed from above, women did not have opportunity to reflect this state of equality. However, the position of women in the Czech Republic in the public and private life was not worst in the numbers and statistics compared to conditions in other European countries, this development has not been accompanied by changes in culture and mindset of people (Havelková, 1999).

2. Methodology

In the following part, I begin by outlining the context of the conducted research, providing an overview of the study and offering a brief explanation of

my decision to adopt a narrative methodology. The primary aim of this research was to give women who identify as feminists an opportunity to tell their stories and to have them heard. I wanted to gain an insight into their individual understandings while examining how their personal stories reflected on public narratives about feminism and how it intersects with an activism. Therefore, I situate this work within the framework of narrative feminist research and social constructivism. As a feminist narrative researcher, I am drawn to approaches addressing stories of women, which are not present in the dominant narratives. The study's aim is not to just extract data from the interviewees but rather *"to explore the relationship between their individual stories and the narratives which frame, shape and influence the construction of those stories"* (Smith, 2017, pp. 180). Taking into the consideration the nature of the research, the question of how feminism is experienced by individuals in their actual lives cannot be answered through quantitative methods. In the following part, I will present the methodological framing of the research, which will be based on the qualitative narrative methodology and social constructivist paradigm.

As **Charmaz** points out, a researcher cannot claim knowledge of the general and universal reality, but always has an understanding of one particular reality that (s)he is researching (Charmaz, 2014). A constructivist view can be used to help to analyse how the tellers shape the telling of their experiences of particular events - how these events are perceived and selected and place within understandings of the individual life (Roberts, 2002). In this view, the constructivist paradigm places priority on the studied phenomenon and the construction of the multiple realities through our lived experiences and interactions with others. Furthermore, the approach concentrates on the processes how reality is co-constructed between the researcher and the researched and shaped by individual experiences. Specifically, to understand the experiences of feminists, one must examine perception of the individual life trajectory, lived and experienced.

2.1 Research design

As mentioned above, a qualitative methodology using narrative interviews was chosen for the research of this topic. The selection of the research method of the investigation was preceded by the creation of a search from the available literature and other sources. This type of interview is characterized by a defined purpose and great flexibility of the whole process of obtaining information, which facilitates the comparison. Adopting a narrative methodology for the study

allows us to realize the complexities of individual practices and expressions, also in relation to the past experience, sometimes lived or sometimes passed from one (generation) to another.

This research examines not only the stories that individuals do tell about themselves and their own experiences, but as well it focuses on their present understandings of the past implications. According to **Elliot**, *“the interplay between these existing cultural discourses or ‘public narratives’, and the production of new individual or ‘ontological’ narratives makes the idea of the narrative construction of identity particularly compelling within sociology”* (Elliot, 2005, pp. 129).

The method of the narrative interview gives informants wider possibility to become active subjects with the process of study – to build up their identity, the story of their lives, to emphasize some aspects and make them more visible, or other way around. As stated by **Woodiwiss**, feminism is also about *“understanding and improving the lives of women (which obviously does not negate the experiences or wellbeing of men)”* (Woodiwiss, 2017, pp. 14). Therefore, one of the goals is to understand why and how women tell the stories and how they reflect on historical background of the Czech feminist movement in which they engage nowadays.

2.2 Research sample

In order to investigate how feminism is experienced by individuals in their actual lives, I interviewed women who identify as feminists and have involved or are involved in feminist activism in the Czech republic. Between July 2020 and June 2021, I conducted 26 in-depth interviews with women between 22 to 50 years, with the average age of 30 years. Given my interest in the reflection on the Czech feminist movement from different perspectives, I interviewed women who were born in the Czech Republic (20) but also women who grew up abroad - in Slovakia (4), Poland (1) and Croatia (1). As **Pearl Green** suggest, it is impossible to select a representative sample of feminists because sufficient description of this population is not available (Green, 1979). However, most of the interviewees, in accordance with the findings of foreign literature, have higher education. There is considerable variation in their experience with feminist activism, ranging from engaging in book clubs, discussions, and work in gender NGO, feminist academic work to frontiers in the grassroots protests. Moreover, it differs regarding its implementation in everyday work: most of the communication partners deal in daily life with gender issues (law, political

science, oral history, linguistics, gender studies, anthropology or sociology) and some of them are active only during seldom, special occasions for example as women's march. At the present, the majority of women live in Prague (16), some are located in Brno (5), in other less populated Czech city (2) or are currently abroad (3).

Firstly, some of the conversational partners were pre-selected and addressed during various events or contacted via personal contacts. These communication partners helped me to gradually get in touch with the network of their acquaintances and acted as link to them – friends, work colleagues who fitted the basic characteristic and who might be willing to be interviewed. Further, some of the communication partners were contacted on the basis of the snowball method, when they were recommended by the previous interviewees or labelled as significant in the already conducted interviews. Addressing the potential communication partners was preceded by an acquaintance during feminist workshops, discussions, camps etc. Since I wanted to be transparent about the goal and structure of the interview, communication partners were informed about the purpose of the research and they have been acknowledged about the main opening question and subsidiary conversational topics and their right to withdrawn from participation at any time. I suggested to the communication partners that the interview would probably last for approximately an hour, but might go on for as long as hour and half or two. Later, this appeared to be helpful to communication partners as it gave them a sense of how much detailed the interviews will be. Some of the women have prepared for the interview, have thought about the ideas they want to talk about, some wanted to be spontaneous. The interviews were conducted mostly in the cafés or places convenient to the communication partners (their apartment, parks nearby, in clubs after discussions etc.) and lasted on average 60 to 70 minutes.

2.3 The interview process

After obtaining informed consent, I invited women to respond to the structured demographic questions (year and month of their birth, place of birth, asking about their time in the Czech Republic – depending if they were born in the Czech Republic or moved there, their education, and their current job or education status). Before asking the first narrative question, the communication partner was assured that she has so much time as needed and she can speak freely without any thematic restrictions. Specifically, I asked the first opening question: *"If you could tell me the story how you started to engage with*

woman's question and feminism, and how have it influenced your life so far". During this phase of narrative interviews, communication partners were left space to develop their self-presentation. The use of the term feminism was not defined during the interviews, but instead I relied on the process of the self-identification. I recognize the limitations of this term and this strategy. I made this decision because the goal was to let the communication partners to decide what is feminism for them and how do they define it.

After finishing the initial narrative, I asked follow up questions and wanted to know how this feminist identity influences their everyday life and how they define feminism, what feminist issues are most important to them, their experiences with feminist activism or their reflection of the current perception of feminism in the Czech Republic. These questions helped communication partners to elaborate more on the themes that have been mentioned, but not discussed enough and also help to clarify what has been told or to expand on the ideas mentioned during narrative phase. In the end of the interview, I asked the participants if they would like to add anything or talk about something that has not yet been mentioned.

All conducted interviews were fully transcribed and consistently anonymized in order to respect the anonymity of the conversational partners. The analysis of the interviews took place in two steps. Firstly, I worked out a map and outline of the stories, capturing the main lines of the narratives, which served to systematize the main moments of the narrative. At the same time, I also performed coding into individual categories and subcategories according to the principles of the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

3. Findings

In the next part, I will present the results of the analyses of the insights of 26 women, who contemplate the historical background of the Czech feminist movement in which they engage nowadays. The goal of this study is to explore how the (lived or transferred) experience is reflected in the presented accounts. As mentioned before, during the interviews, the communication partners were not specifically inquired about this their insight on the past influence on the contemporary feminist organizing. Therefore, I consider very interesting that the topic of historical reflection of post-socialism context emerged in almost every narrative. After more than 30 years after the fall of the communist regime, these past implications still remain valid and have great influence on the feminist

mobilizing and organizing.

Intensive examination of the central themes of the interviews, such as historical reflection of post-socialism context, the assessment of the gender inequality in the present, the evaluation of the historical contribution of feminism, enabled to determine the main categories. For the current study purposes, topics of interviews were initially selected to discover what connects them and links as categories. The article is not intended to be an exhaustive interpretation. Based on the analysis of the narratives, it captures three concepts that are directly related to theories of public disinterest in the feminist organizing after the transformation in 1989. The research results discuss distinctive features of post-socialist countries, e.g., non-activism, unwillingness to express committed consent that are consequence of several decades of complete absence of professional expression of both political representation and gender issues, in comparison with the reflection presented in the conducted interviews (Šiklová, 1997; Havelková, 2006; Vodrážka 2006).

We need to study the local developments in more details, without trying to fit them into Western normative progress framework (Koobak, 2018). Therefore, the question guiding this study is how the development, which Czech society experienced in relation to state socialism, is presented in the personal accounts of women I interviewed. As stated above, the experience of men and women in Czech society was different from the experience presented in the theory of Western feminism. Although socialist societies were patriarchal paternalistic societies, they were not male societies. Both men and women had a common oppressor in the party apparatus (Wagnerová, 1999). According to the number of scholars, these experiences exposed the limitations of the applicability of liberal Western feminism to the Czech context (Šiklová, 1997; 1999; Wagnerová, 1999; Fojtová, 2016).

3.1 Feminist movement and its continuity

Unlike women from Western countries, who had to fight for any progress in their social status, Czech women had gone through the state led emancipation without its realization. Consequently, this lack of reflection resulted in the significant disadvantage after transformation in 1989, because women have taken this equality for granted and thus have not learned to pursue their rights. Thereupon, they have not often realized that nothing can be lost as swiftly as women's rights (Wagnerová, 2009). Therefore, as pointed out by **Wagnerová**, the emancipatory advantage which Czechoslovakia had in the 1960s over the

Western societies has been diminished at the moment of the social change in the autumn of 1989 (Wagnerová, 1999).

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Czechoslovakia overcame a major social change accompanied by heightened expectation about new political regime and economic system. The existence of a totalitarian state has significantly influenced civil and political organizing in general; the existence of feminist activism has been interrupted for many years (Ciprová – Sokačová, 2009). As a result, the most important aspect of emancipation was missing – the possibility for women to define and discuss their rights, make conscious decisions and to express them alone and in the public debates, what would also present an opportunity to react and to be interested in the decisions about the government and social policies (Havelková, 2006; Wagnerová, 2016). One of the aspects that communication partners talked about was the feeling of the loss of continuity of the women's organizing and its influence on the perception of the feminist movement nowadays. My interviewee Emma described it this way:

Well, I think... because here feminism doesn't have longer tradition probably because of communism. So, after the revolution, it suddenly came here as a novelty for many people, so that's why, well... (-Emma, 26)

Secondly, the important topic emerging in the analysis was the reflection of feminism as imported concept in 1990s by the public. In like manner Paula continues:

The Czech feminism is here since the 19th Century as very strong and in fact many things are happening here somehow, but I think we got lost in it somehow and we have lost the continuity of it and now we feel like it's just something that just came from America. (-Paula, 29)

3.2 Negotiation of identity between western feminism and post-socialist society

After the fall of the state socialism, feminists from Western Europe and North America began to visit the post-socialist countries, study the local women's situation from the perspective of their own social and cultural experiences and norms (Frydlová, 2016). Although feminism was not a new movement, it was perceived as an irrelevant concept imported by various feminist groups mainly from the United States or Germany. One of the aspects

that communication partners often emphasized during interviews were the consequences of this prejudice projecting into the present. Interviewee Karin explains:

Take any kind of equality... it is like a scarecrow that it is some kind of import from the West that just wants to disrupt the "perfectly functional state" here... (-Karin, 30)

The association of the feminism exclusively with the West and the lack of knowledge of feminism and the negative stereotypes of Western women hindered the women's capacity to relate feminism to their own lives (Zábrodská, 2014). Social psychologist **Kateřina Zábrodská** showed in her research that the Czech women, after fall of the regime, lacked a conceptual apparatus that would allow them to link feminism to their own lives - women did not make connection between the gender related problems with the issues they encounter on daily basis (Zábrodská, 2014). The Czech women struggled with the many similar issues of discrimination and inequality as Western feminism was trying to resolve, but did not have knowledge to link and conceptualize these experiences. Western feminism was portrayed often as extremism lacking "real life experience" and therefore not in position to give advice to the Czech women (Havelková, 1993; Šiklová, 1997; Zábrodská, 2014). *"Rather than interpreting the women's abjection of feminism as evidence of its irrelevance to Czech women, I argue that the examined accounts demonstrated the women's need to address a wide range of gender issues, albeit without the conceptual framework of feminism"* (Zábrodská, 2014, pp. 111). The gap between women's movement and society led to the fact that women did not believe that feminism is important and thus did have a chance to identify with the goals of feminism, leading to misinterpretation (Vodrážka, 2006). Similarly, according to Hannah, the negative connotations of feminism continue:

First of all, it seems to me that feminism as a topic, if I simplify it completely, it is still like an enormous taboo, it was back then, and still now when I say that I am feminist... and that actually as from my point of view, it is absolute misunderstanding of what feminism is and what it is about, in the first place. (-Hannah, 28)

Consequently, this situation resulted into the fact that not only general public considered the concept of feminism as imported Western ideology, but also Czech feminists adopted an ambivalent attitude towards the practice of Western feminists and its relevance to the Czech experience. Olivia's quote

adequately illustrates the situation questioning the applicability of Western feminist theory to experience of Czech woman and looking for a mechanism to co-opt and further develop their own feminism:

It irritates me when I travel to the western countries, and they start to teach us how "there should be some maternity leave" and I am telling them "well, but we've been doing it here for 50 years, so let's have discussion equal to equal" and perhaps to share the experience and not that they feign they have come up with a maternity leave in the West and they import it here for us, because we already have it here and we know its pitfalls and benefits. But in the end, the whole picture is really worse situation here than in the West. (-Olivia, 29)

After the renewal of civil society in 1989, number of new movements and non-profit organizations began to emerge trying to restore public discourse and engagement. The results of the **Vodrážka**'s research showed that in the 1990s it was common practice for a women's organization to strive for equal opportunities for women and at the same time to distance themselves from labelling as a feminist (Vodrážka, 2006). Similarly, they avoided not only the term 'feminist' but also the term 'women activists' for the sake of their public image. **Slavova** argues that Eastern European feminism followed trajectory of identity deconstructing and constructing – subverting established Western feminists' models, while trying to create their own feminist identity and politics (in Fojtová, 2016, pp. 117). Many women's groups or initiatives in the Czech Republic felt the need to distance themselves publicly from feminism (Vodrážka, 1999). In many cases, they tried to avoid branding as feminists or to use other labels, which were not associated with feminism in order to prevent the (e.g., media) attack or other negative connotations. Similarly, communication partner Paula sums it up:

If any term would be used, as well as equality between men and women... we just probably have a lot the feeling that feminism was somehow imported from West, which is not true at all... (-Paula, 29)

The Czech feminists were looking for a way to interpret and frame their own experience formed under state socialism. They applied different strategies of public (de)construction of their identity through the process of categorization to emphasize the contrasts or the sameness between different social actors (Czech women vs Czech men or Western women).

As stated by **Fojtová**, Czech gender researchers have not only questioned

the relevance of Western liberal feminism, they also criticized the strategies and language many Western feminist used to advocate for women's liberation (Fojtová, 2016). As one of the leading figures of feminist movement after 1989 **Jiřina Šiklová** pointed out, the absence of feminism discourse in the theory and practice could not be fixed only by "*accepting the experience and ideologies of Western feminist movement*" (in Fojtová 2016, pp. 119). Fojtová argues that "*their critiques (note: Czech feminist scholars) should not be seen as a rejection of feminism but as call for a cultural and political situatedness of feminist analysis relevant to Czech women*" (Fojtová, 2016, pp. 116).

Havelková argues that for a longer time prevailing opinion was that the Czech women do not need feminism because they do not seem to complain about any particular issues (Havelková, 1999). Specifically, one of the obstacles that hindered the ability to perceive inequalities in society after the revolution was the misunderstanding of the essential concepts of gender equality and feminism (Havelková, 2006). My interviewee Claudia describes it in her own words:

And I think the big problem is that there has simply been such a discourse since the 1990s that women voluntarily distance themselves from feminism and that they are proud that they are not feminists and that they are proud to sweat at home and they handle the job and care about household...and they don't want to even change it... I accept that it is their own decision. But I think there's just such a hegemony set up here that they accept it as their mission, often they're just proud of it and they just want to be like ... or they want to be like it. (-Claudia, 32)

According to **Magdalena Frouzová**, the tragedy of the Czech society was not (only) in the attitude of men towards feminism, but above all the attitude of women. The fact that men did not want to give up their preferential position is understandable. However, women themselves mocking feminist activists fighting for their rights and claiming that feminism is irrelevant for them is more disconcerting (Frouzová, 1999). These aspects can be observed in Carol's statements:

I think a lot of it stumbles on the fact that many women don't really realize how much they have it internalized or pressed into their heads since they were actually brought up in the patriarchal system...But in my opinion, it only proves how long it has been here... (- Carol, 27)

The Czech women have not often associated the gender-based inequalities

they are experiencing everyday with the issues that feminism is trying to deal with and thus overlooking the systematic gender inequalities (Vodrážka, 2006). **Havelková** points out that society needs to recognize and publicly name those gender problems that arose from socio-cultural status and, to some extent, are beyond the power of individual (Havelková, 1999). Consequently, women have often internalized these individualistic neoliberal frames, believing that individuals are the "architects of their own happiness". Thus, it depends how we frame experiences: women themselves have to become aware of gender inequalities and only then they can initiate a conscious response to these individual experiences and feelings (Klatch, 2001).

As **Dutt and Grabe** suggest, "*individual's knowledge of and ability to relate personally to injustice may lead a person to participate in activism, what remains unclear is what leads some individuals to remain committed and increase their involvement through their lives*" (Dutt, Grabe, 2014, pp. 108). The Czech women have struggled with this perspective to perceive gender inequalities systematically as a consequence of long history of framing their individuality in contrast with the socialist concept of collectivity. **Simona Fojtová** reflects this relationship between gender and nation in the perspective of intersectional framework (Fojtová, 2016, pp. 121). Citizens' historical experience with the communist regime played vital the role in the development of behavioural patterns and attitudes on the civic engagement (Stachová, 2008).

3.3 Social(ist) construction of the collective identity

Havelková describes this specific gender culture as a result of "*the legacy of the absence of democratic public debate in the communist era*" (Havelková, 2006, pp. 26). The problem of feminism in post-socialist countries is mainly caused by the idea of a collective female identity, with which communist power operated in a primitive and simple manner, and for obvious reasons women reject it with reference to their uniqueness (Havelková, 1999). Communist regime forced individuals into uniformity by identification with the socialist citizenship, what consequently led to the "post-communist trauma" of strong resistance to explicit civic (feminist) organizing. The historical and cultural context of the state socialism is important for shaping post-communist civil society historical experience with forced mobilization (Stachová, 2008). Therefore, as one of the consequences, apolitical attitudes and antipathy towards feminism have been one of the distinctive features of civic society in post-socialist countries (Fojtová, 2016). These aspects can be observed in

respondents' statements, in which they perceive that both individual and collective historical experience with the communist regime played vital role in the development of attitudes on the civic engagement and feminist mobilizing.

I have a feeling that we are very apolitical here and I see it in my family also that politics has never been addressed... I think it is enormously important and that it is important also for the public sphere, when the people are out there and that it is visible that someone is dealing with it.
(-Claudia, 32)

Expectations of the new economic system had not been met, and thus the disappointment stemming from transformation has increased demobilization and withdrawal from public activities (Stachová, 2008). As **Valdrová** states, *"the profile of contemporary Czech women lacks the dimension of engaged citizenship"* (in Vodrážka, 2006, pp. 76). The communist regime not only eliminated most forms of independent group activity, but also replaced and displaced them by an organized system of controlled organizations in which membership was often required (ibid). My interviewee Sandra reflects it this way:

Well, I just see communism in an awful lot of things... that it killed like decades of effort, killed any civic engagement. So, I see that it (communist regime) could certainly have a part to play, that it's not just about women, but that it's about, as a whole, a Czech nation that just like to endure an awful lot and not go completely like violent protests. (- Sandra, 28)

Citizens take advantage of the fact that they do not have to be members of any organization - they see freedom in that they can decide whether to participate and voluntarily choose not to be members of any organization. Similarly, **Jiřina Šiklová** mentions that the Czech women were obligated to organize for such a long time that they saw freedom in the liberty not to organize in any way (in Fojtová 2016, pp. 119). Thus, this aspect of feminist identity was for longer time missing from the profile of the Czech feminist movement. Similarly, as communication partner Loren describes:

Well, I think that in the Czech Republic as a whole there is always a problem with some civic activism, because here we are not really used to it at all. We are not used to hold demonstrations; we are not used to hold strikes at all... because there are simply no strikes in the Czech Republic and we are not used to occupy public space, because there is

simply missing the habit of activism... when there will be more active civil society, then it is possible to do real feminist activism... (-Loren, 28)

As **Dutt and Grabe** suggest that individual's social and political identity and as well as the socio-historical context of their lived experiences are significant predictors of willingness to participate in political action (Dutt – Grabe, 2014). Assuming that individuals act on the basis of previous experience and reinterpretation of that experience (Stachová, 2008). In this case, the historical and cultural context of the state socialism have to be seen as an important factor that represents the post-socialist experience and have to be taken into account.

Conclusion

The present situation of the women's movement in the Czech Republic has strong historically conditioned connotations. As **Stachová** points out, without trying to understand the communist past it is impossible to understand the post-socialist present and future (Stachová, 2008). Our present understandings of the past have political and ethical implications on the future and influence possibilities of feminist work and organizing (Koobak, 2018). The goal of this article was to analyse the intersection between political and personal, historical and contemporary aspects of narrating identity in the local context and to gain insight into how feminists reflect on their collective feminist identification in the light of the post-communism development.

The study is drawn on 26 narrative interviews with women, who identify as feminists or feminist activists in the Czech Republic. This research examines not only the stories that individuals do tell about themselves and their own experiences, but as well it focuses on their present understandings of the past implications. Based on the analysis of the narratives, the study explores how the (lived or transferred) experience is reflected in the presented accounts. As **Rapley** mentions, respondents don't always speak just for themselves as individuals; at different moments, they might be representatives or members of various collectives, professions, cultural groups or as a part of particular gendered, sexualized groups (Rapley, 2004).

Based on the analysis of 26 interviews, I examined the historical implications on contemporary feminist organizing presented in the collected narratives. It captures three concepts that are directly related to the theories of public disinterest in feminist organizing after the transformation in 1989. The

research results discuss distinctive features of post-socialist countries, e.g., non-activism, unwillingness to express committed consent in relation to feminist movement and its continuity, the negotiation of western and local feminism and limits of the construction of the collective identity. The presented article is part of the complex research study, which aim is to understand the historical and contemporary importance of feminism and the social problems in the Czech Republic. Therefore, it does not have the ambition to become an exhaustive study, but as a stimulus or a challenge for further research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the women who participated in the study and shared with me their time and irreplaceable experience. Additionally, I am grateful to journal editors and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and constructive feedback.

References:

- CIPROVÁ, K. – SOKAČOVÁ, L. 2009. Neziskové organizace působící v oblasti rovných příležitostí žen a mužů a feministický aktivismus. In SOKAČOVÁ, L. – APPELTOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Gender a demokracie 1989-2009*. Praha: Gender Studies, 2009. ISBN 80-86520-64-1, s. 90-105.
- CHARMAZ, K. 2014. *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd edition). London: Sage, 2014. 388 s. ISBN 978-0-85702-9133.
- DUTT, A. – GRABE, S. 2014. Lifetime activism, marginality, and psychology: Narratives of lifelong feminist activists committed to social change. In *Qualitative Psychology*, vol. 1, iss.2, 2014, ISSN 2326-3598, s. 107-122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/qup0000010>
- ELLIOTT, J. 2005. *Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Los Angeles, California: Sage. 2005. 232 s. ISBN 978-1-4129-0041-6.
- FOJTOVÁ, S. 2016. Contested Feminism: The East/West Feminist Encounters in the 1990s. In ŠIKLOVÁ, J. – JUSOVÁ, I. (eds.) *Czech feminisms: perspectives on gender in East Central Europe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-253-02191-5, s. 111-125. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005w2f.10>
- FRÝDLOVÁ, P. 2016. Women's Memory: Searching for Identity under Socialism. In ŠIKLOVÁ, J. – JUSOVÁ, I. (eds.) *Czech feminisms:*

- perspectives on gender in East Central Europe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-253-02191-5, s. 95-107.
- FROUZOVÁ, M. 1999. České ženy mezi Východem a Západem. In CHŘIBKOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Feminismus devadesátých let českýma očima: Nové čtení světa*. Praha: Marie Chřibková, 1999. ISBN 80-902443-6-X, s. 65-73.
- GREEN, P. 1979. The Feminist Consciousness. In *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 20, 1979, iss. 3. ISSN 1533-8525, s. 359-374. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1979.tb01221.x>
- HAŠKOVÁ, H. – KŘÍŽKOVÁ, A. – LINKOVÁ, M. (Eds.). 2006. *Mnohohlasem: vyjednávání ženských prostorů po roce 1989*. Praha: Sociologický ústav Akademie věd ČR Praha, 2006. 331 s. ISBN 80-7330-087-7.
- HAŠKOVÁ, H. – UHDE, Z. 2016. Czech Women's NGOs: Women's Voices and Claims in the Public Sphere. In ŠIKLOVÁ, J. – JUSOVÁ, I. (eds.) *Czech feminisms: perspectives on gender in East Central Europe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-253-02191-5, s. 126-143. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005w2f.11>
- HAVELKOVÁ, H. 1993. "Patriarchy" in Czech society. In *Hypatia*, vol. 8, iss. 4, 1993. ISSN 1527-2001, s. 89-96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1993.tb00278.x>
- HAVELKOVÁ, H. 1999. Affidamento. In CHŘIBKOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Feminismus devadesátých let českýma očima: Nové čtení světa*. Praha: Marie Chřibková, 1999. ISBN 80-902443-6-X, s. 46-64.
- HAVELKOVÁ, H. 2006. Jako v loterii: politická reprezentace žen v ČR po roce 1989. In HAŠKOVÁ, H. – KŘÍŽKOVÁ, A. – LINKOVÁ, M. (eds.). *Mnohohlasem: vyjednávání ženských prostorů po roce 1989*. Praha: Sociologický ústav Akademie věd ČR Praha, 2006. ISBN 80-7330-087-7, s. 25-42.
- HAVELKOVÁ, H. 2008. Otázníky českého ženského hnutí po roce 1989. In GJURIČOVÁ, A. – KOPEČEK, M. (eds.) *Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989*. Praha: Paseka, 2008. ISBN 978-80-7185-876-8, s. 217-230.
- HAVELKOVÁ, H. – OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ, L. (Eds.). 2014. *The politics of gender culture under state socialism: An expropriated voice*. London: Routledge. 264 s. ISBN 978-0-415-72083-0. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315819174>
- JUSOVÁ, I. – ŠIKLOVÁ, J. 2016. *Czech feminisms: perspectives on gender in East Central Europe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016, s. 325, ISBN 978-0-253-02191-5.

- KICZKOVÁ, Z. 2000. *O skúsenosti sebautvárania v biografických rozhovoroch*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského. 314 s. ISBN 80-89018-96-3.
- KLATCH, R. 2001. The Formation of Feminist Consciousness among Left- and Right-Wing Activists of the 1960s. In *Gender and Society*, vol. 15, 2001, iss. 6, ISSN 1552-3977, s. 791-815. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124301015006002>
- KOOBÁK, R. 2018. Narrating feminisms: what do we talk about when we talk about feminism in Estonia?, In *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 25, 2018, iss. 7, ISSN 1360-0524, s. 1010-1024. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1471048>
- LIŠKOVÁ, K. 2018. *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 281 s. ISBN 978-1-108-42469-1.
- MALEČKOVÁ, J. 2016. The Importance of Being Nationalist. In ŠIKLOVÁ, J. – JUSOVÁ, I. (eds.) *Czech feminisms: perspectives on gender in East Central Europe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-253-02191-5, s. 46-59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005w2f.6>
- NYKLOVÁ, B. 2013. Krajinou súčasného českého feminizmu. In *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research*, vol. 14, iss. 1. ISSN 2570-6578, s. 52-63.
- OSVALDOVÁ, B. 2004. *Česká média a feminismus*. Praha: Slon. 154 s. ISBN 80-7277-263-5.
- PELAK, C. F. – TAYLOR, V. – WHITTIER, N. 1999. Gender Movements. In CHAFETZ, J. S. (eds.) *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999. ISBN 978-0387324609. s. 147–175. https://doi.org/10.1007/0-387-36218-5_8
- ROBERTS, B. 2002. *Biographical research*. Buckingham: Open University Press. 212 s. ISBN 033520287X.
- SMITH, K. 2017. Women, Asylum and Resistance: A Feminist Narrative Approach to Making Sense of Stories. In WOODIWISS J. – SMITH K. – LOCKWOOD K. (eds) *Feminist Narrative Research: opportunities and challenges*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 978-1-137-48567-0, s. 179-202. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-48568-7_8
- SOKAČOVÁ, L. 2009. Genderové zmeny po roce 1989 v České republice. In SOKAČOVÁ, L., APPELTOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Gender a demokracie 1989-2009*. Praha: Gender Studies, 2009. ISBN 80-86520-64-1, s. 7-10.
- STACHOVÁ, J. 2008. *Občanská společnost v regionech České republiky*. Sociologický ústav AV ČR. 2008, s. 98, ISBN 978-80-7330-142-2.
- ŠIKLOVÁ, J. 1997. Feminism and the Roots of Apathy in the Czech Republic. In *Social research* [online]. New York, NY: Graduate Faculty of Political and

- Social Science, New School for Social Research, vol. 64, 1997, iss. 2, s. 258-280.
- ŠIKLOVÁ, J. 1999. Únava z vysvětlování. In CHŘIBKOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Feminismus devadesátých let českýma očima: Nové čtení světa*. Praha: Marie Chřibková, 1999. ISBN 80-902443-6-X, s. 128-139.
- VODRÁŽKA, M. 1999. Hranice české společnosti střeží tajná „pohlavní policie“. In CHŘIBKOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Feminismus devadesátých let českýma očima: Nové čtení světa*. Praha: Marie Chřibková, 1999. ISBN 80-902443-6-X, s. 254-259.
- VODRÁŽKA, M. 2006. Aktivismus bez hnutí nebo protohnutí?: Ženské organizace a skupiny v ČR v letech 1989-2006. In HAŠKOVÁ, H. – KRÍŽKOVÁ, A. – LINKOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Mnohohlasem: vyjednávání ženských prostorů po roce 1989*. Praha: Sociologický ústav Akademie věd ČR Praha, 2006. ISBN 80-7330-087-7, s. 61-80.
- WAGNEROVÁ, A. 1999. České ženy na cestě od reálného socialismu k reálnému kapitalismu. In CHŘIBKOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Feminismus devadesátých let českýma očima: Nové čtení světa*. Praha: Marie Chřibková, 1999. ISBN 80-902443-6-X, s. 80-90.
- WAGNEROVÁ, A. 2009. Co přinesl a co nepřinesl českým ženám socialistický model rovnoprávnosti - aneb nejen jesle a traktoristky. In SOKAČOVÁ, L. – APPELTOVÁ, M. (eds.) *Gender a demokracie 1989-2009*. Praha: Gender Studies, 2009. ISBN 80-86520-64-1, s. 11-19.
- WAGNEROVÁ, A. 2016. Women as the Object and Subject of the Socialist Form of Women's Emancipation. In ŠIKLOVÁ, J. – JUSOVÁ, I. (eds.) *Czech feminisms: perspectives on gender in East Central Europe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-253-02191-5, s. 77-94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005w2f.8>
- WOODIWISS J. 2017. Challenges for Feminist Research: Contested Stories, Dominant Narratives and Narrative Frameworks. In WOODIWISS J. – SMITH K. – LOCKWOOD K. (eds) *Feminist Narrative Research: opportunities and challenges*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 978-1-137-48567-0, s. 13-34. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-48568-7_2
- ZÁBRODSKÁ, K. 2014. Between femininity and feminism: Negotiating the identity of a 'Czech socialist woman' in women's accounts of state socialism. In H. HAVELKOVÁ, & L. OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ (eds.) *The politics of gender culture under state socialism: An expropriated voice*. London: Routledge, 2014. ISBN 978-0-415-72083-0, s. 109-130.