

Does socialism make heterosexual men try to be better partners?

Thursday 20 February 2020, by [DAY Meagan](#), [GHODSEE Kristen R.](#) (Date first published: 29 November 2018).

Hundreds of millions of living Eastern Europeans, including many who abhorred the political reality behind the Iron Curtain, report that their basic standard of living was higher under authoritarian socialism than under contemporary free-market capitalism. Taking a cue from them, Ghodsee's book starts from the premise that some aspects of life were better under twentieth-century state socialism than they are today, even as others were worse. Appreciating the bad parts doesn't require ignoring the good parts, her thinking goes. One can acknowledge simultaneously the horrors of the secret police and the comforts of a strong social safety net.

One of the most positive features of state socialism, Ghodsee argues, is that it gave women economic independence from men. In the former Soviet countries, women may not have been able to take part in free elections or find a diversity of consumer goods, but they were guaranteed public education, jobs, housing, health care, maternity leave, child allowances, child care, and more. Not only did this arrangement liberate women and men alike from the anxieties and pressures of sink-or-swim capitalism; it also meant that women were much less likely to rely on male partners for the fulfillment of basic needs. This in turn meant that heterosexual women's romantic relationships with men were more optional, less constrained by economic considerations, and often more egalitarian. As Ghodsee writes in her book:

When women enjoy their own sources of income, and the state guarantees social security in old age, illness, and disability, women have no economic reason to stay in abusive, unfulfilling, or otherwise unhealthy relationships. In countries such as Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and East Germany, women's economic independence translated into a culture in which personal relationships could be freed from market influences. Women didn't have to marry for money.

Jacobin staff writer Meagan Day spoke with Ghodsee about women's prospects under socialism and capitalism.

MD | In former state socialist countries, women today are vastly more likely than their counterparts in the West to work in STEM fields. Why is that?

KRG | That's a result of intentional education and training of women in these fields under state socialism.

Right now, Bulgaria and Romania have the highest percentage of women working in tech in the EU. The reason is that there were policies in place that allowed women to enter fields that in the West have remained dominated by men. There was a concerted effort on the part of state socialist governments, going all the way back to the thirties in the Soviet Union and the fifties in Eastern Europe, to integrate women into formerly more masculine parts of the economy — law, medicine,

academia, banking. Women were even trained in the military, as pilots and snipers and parachuters.

Even so, a new gendered division of labor emerged under twentieth-century socialism. Socialist economies valued physical hard labor over what we would think of as white-collar work. Men were more likely to perform the former and women the latter.

Male employment was often better remunerated. But, on the other hand, wages don't matter as much when the state is providing a huge array of social services. The state guaranteed jobs, housing, health care, education, and things like daycare and extended paid maternity leaves. Women were not compensated as well as men, but they still had a greater degree of economic independence from men than they do today.

State socialist feminists — and I should put the term “feminist” in quotes, because really they were women's activists — understood women to have different needs from men, and sought to implement policies to meet those needs. We're not talking about gender or sexual equality in exactly the way that it was articulated by Western feminists in the second wave. The idea was instead that men and women were both making valuable contributions to society, but doing so in different ways. Women's role as mothers was often assumed. To that end, there were many state policies put in place to deal with the work-family balance issues that women are still dealing with today in the West.

MD | State socialist governments attempted to socialize not just health care, housing, and education but also domestic work and child care. What was the thinking behind that effort?

KRG | This idea that we should socialize domestic work to make it valuable goes back to the utopian socialist Flora Tristan in France in the 1840s. Decades later, German socialist Lily Braun came up with the idea of what she called maternity insurance, and German socialist Clara Zetkin more fully developed the idea of socializing child care and domestic work.

The theory became a reality after 1917 in the Soviet Union, with the support of Lenin and especially of Alexandra Kollontai, who was the commissar of social welfare. Kollontai tried to put into place the socialization of child care in the creation of children's homes. She wanted to create public canteens where people could eat. She wanted to create public laundries. She also wanted to create mending cooperatives, because back then mending was a huge task that women had to do at home and she thought it would be more efficient if done collectively, reducing the burden on individual women.

This was all attempted in the early twenties. The problem is that the Soviet state wasn't wealthy enough and it collapsed. All of these laws were reversed by 1936 because Stalin said essentially, “We have to take our resources and file them into the industrial economy, and it's much more affordable for us to get these women doing this work at home for free.” But importantly, those same policies that Kollontai tried to implement in the twenties made a resurgence in Eastern Europe after 1945.

MD | What effect did these structural changes have on the relationships between individual men and women in state socialist countries? I'm thinking of an example from your book of men observing that women in East Germany were more difficult to entice with an attractive salary. “You had to be interesting,” one man recalled.

KRG | What we see is that when women have economic independence from men — in the sense that they can support children out of wedlock, they have jobs, they have pensions, they have access to housing and their basic needs like utilities and food are subsidized — they don't stick around in relationships that are unsatisfying. When they can leave, they don't stay with men who don't treat

them well.

So if a man is heterosexual and he wants to be in a relationship with a woman, it's not that easy to get a woman by providing her economic security she doesn't have, or buying her something that she needs. He has to be kind, thoughtful, attractive in other ways. And it turns out that when men have to be "interesting" in order to attract women, they are. They actually end up being better men. It's not that difficult a concept. I don't know why people are so shocked by this.

Again I want to be careful not to idealize life behind the Iron Curtain. There were some very negative aspects to it, obviously. But on the other hand, there were some demonstrably positive social effects of the economic emancipation of women. We can also see these [same social effects](#) today in more democratic socialist countries like Sweden or Norway or Denmark.

MD | Western feminists are deeply attached to the project of reforming or civilizing individual men. That's not necessarily a misguided objective, since men's behavior often poses real problems for women. Whether that behavior is the number one problem facing women is a separate question – but even if you think it is, and if addressing men's behavior is your main political project, then what this history shows us is that structural economic changes may actually be a better way to go about it.

KRG | I suppose for a lot of people the individual civilizing mission feels more doable than structural change, so they feel compelled to concentrate their limited energy in that way. But I think that in a culture where women have more economic opportunities, men self-civilize in a way because they realize that if they want to be in relationships with women they can't be abusive, they can't take women for granted.

There were brilliant socialist feminists in the seventies, people like Silvia Federici and others, who were making the case that large structural changes would reorganize relationships between men and women. What happened is that, as Nancy Fraser has [written about](#), feminism was largely co-opted by neoliberal capitalism. So we ended up getting a kind of Sheryl Sandberg-style "[lean in](#)" feminism, which is all about individual success and creating conditions for a handful of women to be as filthy rich as a handful of men are.

The idea of socialist feminism evaporated with the general global backlash against Marxism and the rise of neoliberalism. We're still surviving that now.

MD | You wrote that the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe "created a perfect laboratory to investigate the effects of capitalism on women's lives." You document some of the harshest effects in this passage:

Today, Russian mail-order brides, Ukrainian sex-workers, Moldovan nannies, and Polish maids flood Western Europe. Unscrupulous middle-men harvest blond hair from poor Belorussian teenagers for New York wig makers. In St. Petersburg, women attend academies for aspiring gold diggers. Prague is an epicenter of the European porn industry. Human traffickers prowl the streets of Sofia, Bucharest, and Chişinău for hapless girls dreaming of a more prosperous life in the West.

Westerners are generally aware of the impoverishment of women from former Soviet states and the resulting intensification of gender oppression. But when the question arises as to why, I think the default explanation is that it's communism's fault. Your book makes a protracted argument that actually the fault lies with capitalism instead. So why is

capitalism, not socialism, to blame for this state of affairs?

KRG | When state socialism was dismantled, that meant privatization and the liquidation of state-owned enterprises and the erosion of the social welfare state. A lot of supports for women disappeared — paid maternity leave, children’s centers, crèches and kindergartens, child allowances and so on. Women were both thrown at the mercy of capitalist markets and, at the same time, pushed back into the home and forced to shoulder the burden of unpaid care work.

When we do surveys and research, many Eastern European women talk about how they had more opportunities under state socialism. Even despite the lack of consumer goods, the travel restrictions, the censorship, and the secret police, they still say they had more life opportunities than young girls in Eastern Europe do today.

The countries in the world with the fastest-shrinking populations are in Eastern Europe, partially because women aren’t having children — because there’s no economy to support a family — and partially because of out-migration. In the absence of economic security, women are using the tools they have to make a better life, including commodifying their relationships with men. That’s why when you type in “Ukrainian women” on Google the first thing that comes up is ads for mail-order brides.

MD | Okay so capitalism hasn’t treated women in poor countries well. What about women who live under capitalism in wealthier Western countries? Does it work for us?

KRG | The particular way that capitalism is structured historically is that employers will only ever hire a woman if she’s cheaper than a man. This is because, among other reasons, she’s likely to take time out of the labor force in order to perform care work at home, especially when she has children. Why would you employ someone unreliable unless you could pay them a lower wage?

You end up with this vicious cycle where care work is necessary but unpaid, so someone has to take time away from the workforce to do it, and that person is always the one who makes the lower wage, which means it’s women, which reinforces the idea that they can and ought to be paid less. Under capitalism you therefore have an equilibrium where women are permanently disadvantaged in the labor market.

Socialist feminists have always argued that the only way to structurally fix this problem in a capitalist labor market is by the state coming in and providing social support for care work.

For a host of reasons, care work for the elderly or the ill or certainly for children often falls into the lap of women. Given that this work has to be done, societies have a choice: they can reduce the burden of care work on women by transferring it from the individual to society, or they can completely devalue it and shove it into the private sphere where women do it for free.

If you want to cut taxes for the super-rich, if that’s your priority, you’re going to push all that labor into the private sphere. Alternatively, you could bring it into the public sphere. Universal health care, child care, public education. The super-rich in this country use the state to further their interests — why shouldn’t ordinary people do the same thing? There are countries around the world with robust safety nets, and they’re not sliding toward the gulag.

MD | It seems to me that one of the purposes of your book is to challenge Western ideas about not just gender and socialism, but about life under state socialism in general. How do Westerners imagine life under state socialism, and how does the stereotype miss the mark?

KRG | We shouldn't ignore the purges and the gulags and the state violence, but we have to be clear that it wasn't like that all the time. There are hundreds of millions of people alive today who grew up under socialism and have a very different impression of it. Because I'm an ethnographer who's been doing field work in Eastern Europe for twenty years, I know many people who will tell you that life was much more nuanced and complex, and not as overwhelmingly negative as Westerners imagine. Certainly not everybody was marching around in Mao suits with shaved heads, or starving in the streets and begging for a pair of jeans.

Young people who are coming to socialist ideas today, they get automatically whacked over the head with the cudgel of twentieth-century socialist crimes in Eastern Europe. If you say anything about state-funded health care, people start screaming about the purges and the gulags. We have to be able to have a nuanced, thoughtful, enriching conversation about the past. The anti-communist knee-jerk reaction you get in the United States makes it difficult to have that conversation. I hope my book makes it a little easier.

Kristen R. Ghodsee is a professor of Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Dissent*. She is the author of *Red Hangover: Legacies of 20th Century Communism*.

Meagan Day is a staff writer at *Jacobin*.

Meagan Day
Kristen R. Ghodsee

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Jacobin

<https://jacobinmag.com/2018/11/kristen-ghodsee-women-sex-under-socialism-eastern-bloc-communism/>