



Katalin Fábián, ed., *Domestic Violence in Postcommunist States: Local Activism, National Policies, and Global Forces*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 372 pp., US\$24.90 (pb), ISBN 978-0-25322-218-3.

Book Review by **Maija Jäppinen**

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Traditionally, domestic violence against women has been accepted, sometimes even glorified, and seen as a private matter. This is something that Eastern European women's groups started to fight against in the early 1990s, and their work has not been without real achievements. Since the collapse of communist systems, the process of acknowledging domestic violence has changed an earlier tabooed and unrecognized issue, which had no name, to a topic of public discussion in these countries. It has also become a key theme of local and transnational women's activism and a concern of intergovernmental organizations.

During the past twenty years, women's issues in the postcommunist context have been the focus of many, especially Western, political scientists engaged in feminist research. One of the main foci of their studies on gender politics and women's activism has been campaigns against domestic violence.¹ *Domestic Violence in Postcommunist States* is significant in bringing together nuanced studies from different countries and offering the so far most comprehensive picture of local and transnational activism, as well as the development of state policies, on domestic violence in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia. The volume is a result of the long cooperation of scholars committed to research on domestic violence in the area. The geographical range of countries covered in the book is comprehensive, extending from Central and Eastern Europe to Central Asia.

A special delight is that in addition to Eastern Europe, some Central Asian countries have been included in the analyses. One of the most interesting chapters of the volume, written by Muborak Sharipova and Katalin Fábián, grasps the problems of naming and localizing the problem in Tajikistan. The authors give a detailed account of the process of conducting the first survey on violence against women at the time when the country was gradually abandoning Soviet-era liberation and turning back to traditional norms and gender segregation. The authors describe inventing Tajik words for tabooed "foreign concepts" and debates between World Health Organization experts and the local interviewing staff because the latter, for example, did not consider forced intercourse by a husband as sexual violence, but as something that may sometimes happen in a marriage.

The issue of localizing a global agenda and campaigning to develop public understanding and awareness of the problem is the focus of many of the book's chapters. As Edward Snajdr writes when analyzing nongovernmental organization (NGO) activism in Kazakhstan, "in order to shape domestic violence policy in a postcommunist state,

women's activists must perform a series of balancing acts between the principles of global feminism and local ethnic politics, and between institutional norms and NGO-driven reforms" (114).

One interesting detail in the localizing process has been the adding of *economic violence* to Western conceptualizations of forms of violence. A difficult point has included legitimizing the focus on violence against women while many local critics would prefer focusing on children as the most vulnerable group of victims of violence, as Thomas Chivens notes in his chapter on the politics of awareness in Poland. Writing on the development of domestic violence legislation in Slovenia, Sonja Robnik describes how conservative politicians have tried to prevent the reforms by using arguments related to fertility rates, which they peculiarly enough interpreted to be threatened by reducing violence in families. Thus, these examples show how the discussions on domestic violence are always related to other actual topics in a given society.

As editor Katalin Fábíán points out, the process of translation is still going on. Analyses in this volume show that in many of these countries the translation process and adapting the issue to a local interpretation in order to gain acceptance from a broad public has meant framing it in a more family-centered and gender-neutral, and less political way, instead of the original feminist interpretations. However, Janet Elise Johnson and Gulnara Zaynullina argue, based on their analysis of Russian writing about domestic violence, that the tension between these two frameworks can sometimes also be fruitful, while a flexible use of them can help to undermine the traditional gender order.

According to Katalin Fábíán's chapter on the reframing of domestic violence, which has been fabulously illustrated with photos from the campaigns, all postcommunist Central and Eastern European countries with the exception of Hungary had adopted domestic violence laws before the end of 2009. At the same time, Alexandra Hrycak, for example, raises critical points on the implementation of new legislation. She writes about Ukraine, which adopted a law on domestic violence some time ago, and points out that while reforms have been conducted, some of them have remained "Potemkin villages" instead of achieving real change. Many NGOs have had difficulties after the foreign funding dried out. Hrycak also notes the problems of the state crisis centers such as bureaucracy, medical certificate requirements, and sticking to *propiskas*. Based on the monitoring of the situation, only ten percent of women experiencing domestic violence at most seek help from the NGO or state crisis centers in Ukraine.

The second part of the book is devoted to international organizations and their role in developing domestic violence policies in the postcommunist states. The chapters analyze, first, the actions of intergovernmental organizations, such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations, and transnational feminist networks, including the Women Against Violence in Europe Network, the Daphne project of the EU, and the Network of Crisis Centers in the Barents Region. They also analyze the resonance of international treaties such as the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.

Celeste Montoya claims in her chapter that despite some failures, the EU has served as an important advocate for combating violence against women by placing the issue high on the European political agenda, encouraging policy change in member and candidate states, and providing funding for local and transnational organizing. According to Laura Brunell and Janet Elise Johnson's comparative analysis of eleven states and their responses to domestic violence, transnational feminist networking really makes a difference: the networks have proven to be crucial facilitators of domestic violence reform in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia.

Olga Avdeyeva's analysis of the implementation of critical policy components of international treaties reveals low compliance with CEDAW and the Beijing Platform of Action. Governments ratify the treaties, but often they do not take effective steps to comply with them. However, when comparing countries, Avdeyeva found correlations between the level of state actions and the level of economic development, political regime, and the involvement of international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, which facilitate change in human rights practices.

The volume draws an excellent picture of the development of domestic violence policies in the postcommunist context during the last twenty years. The book chapters reflect the directions of recent scholarly interest in the topic: the focus is mostly on NGO activism, transnational networks and intergovernmental organizations, and state responses to the newly publicly discussed problem of domestic violence. Together the chapters make a thematically coherent book, which provides deep analysis and insight into the topic. At the same time, a critical reader might argue that the volume narrowly escapes being monotonous in its perspectives, theoretical standpoints, and research questions.

From the viewpoint of the social sciences, research on domestic violence and the responses to it in postcommunist countries still lacks the voices of survivors of violence, the perspective of those who use the services now provided, and deeper analysis of the working practices of and everyday interactions at the crisis centers. The growing amount of state services should be better included in the analyses. Also we need more research about the cultural patterns and practical hindrances that prevent millions of Eastern European women from seeking help in domestic violence situations, and about the question why so many do not feel the activism around this issue to be in their interest. Cultural studies perspectives from the point of view of political studies would be welcome here.

◆ Note

1. Julie Hemment, *Empowering Women in Russia: Activism, Aid and NGOs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Janet Johnson, *Gender Violence in Russia: The Politics of Feminist Intervention* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Janet Johnson and Jean Robinson, eds., *Living Gender After Communism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).