

Changing Models of Parenting in Contemporary Urban Families in Bulgaria¹

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Abstract

Ever more often one can see a growing number of fathers tending to their young children in public playgrounds in big cities in Bulgaria, and especially in Sofia. An unusual sight in the past, currently more fathers take care of their young children either during usual work/business hours or before and after work. This project seeks to explore changing patterns of parenting in a central neighborhood in Sofia and their relation to political, social and economic processes of transformation in Bulgaria after 1989. It asks: What does this relatively new phenomenon reveal about the gendering of the labor market, social organization and state services, and changes in gender ideologies and practices of urban families with young children in postsocialist Bulgaria? This paper is based on a two-month ethnographic research project conducted in the summer of 2009 among families who frequent several children's playgrounds in the "Lozenetz" neighborhood in Sofia. Through three family scenarios, I study the roles and responsibilities of men and women within and outside their homes to track changing gender relations and connect them to the context of social politics and practices of the Bulgarian state, the fluctuations of the labor market, and the personal choices of individuals. The paper shows that in comparison to the socialist family models, competitive as well as models of relative equality of gender relations within urban families have been constructed after 1989. These practices are possible also because of the appearance of new roles, such as "super-man," "equal partner," and "active father," associating some men in Bulgaria with active participation in the private space of the family.

For the past couple of years, a growing number of fathers have been seen taking their small children for walks and looking after them in public spaces (e.g. playgrounds) in Sofia without the noticeable presence of mothers and grandmothers. This recent phenomenon inspired my interest in the current dynamics of urban families with small children.³ This group is interesting because infants and toddlers in Bulgaria are traditionally raised within the

family by female members of the household like mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. On the other hand, the present problems with accessibility to state nurseries and kindergartens, coupled with the low quality of service they provide, have left many families in larger Bulgarian cities wondering how to manage care for their small children. Thus, my study focuses on the current roles of men and women, divisions of household labor between the sexes, and attitudes toward and perceptions of gender roles in families with children of up to three years of age. Taking these factors into account, I ask how unstable social conditions have contributed to changes in gender relations and parenting patterns.

The main questions this research poses are: What are the responsibilities of men and women within the household (the private sphere) and outside the house (the public sphere)? What images of masculinity and femininity are currently in use, and what do they entail? And how do gender relations relate to the context of social policies and practices of the Bulgarian state, to gender differentiation of the labor market, and to the personal choices of individuals?

To answer these questions, I first briefly explain models of socialist family relations. I next provide a short overview of how economic restructuring, state withdrawal from the control of prices and services, and changes in postsocialist Bulgarian policy have influenced men and women differently. Finally, I analyze three types of parenting and family relations that have resulted from postsocialist economic and social conditions. In my sample, all three models occur with almost equal frequency.

Methodology

This research is based on an anthropological participant-observation study of practices and discourses of parents of toddlers in three playgrounds in Sofia's "Lozenets" neighborhood, as well as on information collected through questionnaires and unstructured follow-up interviews during two months in the summer of 2009.⁴ I gave out questionnaires to and interviewed 31 individuals, consisting of 17 men and 14 women. Out of the 13 interviewed couples, 9 were married and 4 were unmarried and cohabiting. The questionnaires included questions about informants' origin, age, family status, education, career, and household responsibilities. The follow-up interviews focused on subjective perceptions and attitudes toward relations between men and women at home, care for the children, parents' careers, notions about family, and ideas for the future.

The analysis of the collected data is based on two bodies of literature. The first body is a growing anthropological literature about the economic, political, and social changes of

Eastern Europe – and more specifically Bulgaria – after the fall of the socialist regimes in 1989. Based on the second body of literature, I also use a feminist conceptualization of these changes, which adds a gendered perspective to the analysis of the transformation and shows how these processes are deeply gendered – i.e. how the post-1989 transformation affects Eastern European women and men differently in relation to job loss, social skills and resources, dependency on state support, family practices, and notions about the relations between men and women.

The concept of gender borrowed in this form from Gal and Kligman (2000) I utilize here as the socially and culturally constructed ideas of differences between men and women, and of the power and inequality which accompany the reproduction of these differences in the institutionalized practices of society (Gal and Kligman 2000:3-14). And although the meanings of “man,” “woman,” “male,” and “female” vary in different historical contexts, these cultural categories are continuously constructed in everyday interactions which, in turn, are defined by larger discourses and through specific institutions (Gal and Kligman 2000:38). And just as state policies can influence gender relations, so too can perceptions about the differences between men and women structure and legitimize state policies and institutions.

The main categories that I use in this analysis of socialist and postsocialist family practices and perceptions are *continuity-discontinuity* from state socialism, *autonomy-dependency* (from partners, the state, the labor market), and the dichotomy of *private-public* (the difference between the personal, passive, emotional sphere associated with women, and the social, active, public sphere associated with men). And while a large part of the feminist literature debates the different usages of the public-private dichotomy as an analytical method or as a life practice – from patriarchal relations in 17th-18th century England and France to gender struggles in contemporary societies – I instrumentalize it here as a discursive definition. Thus, as Gal and Kligman argue, the differentiation of public-private can be used for organization, categorization, and counterposition of a vast array of social facts, such as institutions, actions, relations, perceptions, and interactions in both socialist and postsocialist contexts.

The Socialist Gender Regime

After World War II, the East European socialist states attempted to reformulate institutional forms of private-public, associating women with the private sphere, reproduction, and housework, and connecting men to the public sphere, work outside the

house, and politics. These models of behavior and public discourses were inherited from previous capitalist regimes (Meyer 1985, Wolchik 1985). However, as Gal and Kligman note, new configurations of this dichotomy also came into existence. On the one hand, the fundamental difference between home and public was preserved during socialism. At the same time, the socialist authorities participated in the creation of the category “socialist woman” based on previously existing gender stereotypes. “Women’s work” was defined by the planners of socialism as located primarily in the service and caretaking spheres of the socialist economy. Additionally, as Gal and Kligman observe, different social provisions for women, such as maternity leaves, produced an image and reality of women as less dependable workers, which was opposite to the planners’ declared intentions. In that way, women throughout Eastern Europe systematically received lower salaries than men. The fact that women were constructed as “different” – especially in the later stages of socialism – also allowed for the re-creation of gender hierarchies at work, with men monopolizing higher positions in socialist institutions (Gal and Kligman 2000:49).

The Socialist Family and Gender Images

The household during socialism became a space where citizens – and especially women – felt personal fulfillment as opposed to in the outside world. At home, women – and oftentimes men – did work that they found quite productive and awarding. People perceived as fundamental the distinction between “them,” who ruled the country, and the family, the private “us,” who sacrificed and suffered (Gal and Kligman 2000:50). The home and family during socialism could be described as a refuge from the strong, ruling, and controlling “them” of the state. Thus, the private-public opposition became parallel to the “us-them” dichotomy, although Gal and Kligman argue that there was no clear-cut “us” versus “them,” but rather, that these categories were interwoven at several different levels (Gal and Kligman 2000:51).

Images of femininity and masculinity produced in accordance with socialist arrangements are well-documented in the literature (Verdery 1996, Fodor 2006, Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2000). Most frequently described are constantly overworked women who combine work outside the home with child care and household labor. According to various accounts (Panova, Gavrilova, and Merdzanska 1993:17, Daskalova 2000:349), women under socialism saw themselves as brave and self-sacrificing victims who managed to take care of everything on their own. On the one hand, women were described as having a sense of

gratification and power in the home, which came from their central position in the household. On the other hand, socialist women felt rather independent with relatively high self-esteem, which came from the fact that they were educated, worked outside the home, and made their own living. Thus, as Gal and Kligman observe, encouraged by the socialist state, women ideally came close to the American ideal of a “super-woman” – that is, a “brave victim” who was simultaneously a caring mother and housewife and successful in her career (2000:53). Ethnographic material on the subjectivity and self-perception of socialist women shows, however, that reality seldom matched the ideal (Fodor 2006, Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2000).

The image in the literature of the socialist man is of someone who was better paid, but simultaneously acted as a “big child” at home – unreliable, needy, dependent, vulnerable, and demanding to be taken care of (Gal and Kligman 2000:54). And while socialism created many new images of and tasks for women – as mother, worker, heroine, and intellectual – men primarily remained the “head of the household.” As Gal and Kligman note, in contrast to new images of femininity, socialism produced very few alternative images of masculinity, such as the loyal party member or career opportunist; and none of them had to do with the man’s role in the family or household (2000:55). Oftentimes the relations between the “brave victim” and “big child” were tense, especially in families where the women had better jobs. As seen in various accounts, these stereotypes were not only examples of socialist ideology, but were also aspects of real-life experience.

It could be argued that socialism transformed gender relations by producing different forms of male privilege. At work this was men’s monopoly of leadership positions; at home it was the right to be tended to. At the same time, as opposed to previous social models, women under socialism were not confined to only the private sphere. Men, together with women, participated in the non-state private space of the home, especially when the main source of income came from the “parallel” home economy. Thus, the dichotomy of private-women versus public-men did not disappear during socialism but was instead displaced and became parallel to the opposition between “us,” the victims, and “them,” the powerful who ran the state.

The New Old Trajectories of Postsocialism

After 1989, the orientation of East European economies toward market rules and privatization – together with state withdrawal from the control of prices, services, and

healthcare – transformed all institutions: state administrative organs, workplaces, and households through which gender regimes had been instrumentalized during socialism. Studies of these processes document major drops in production, fast unemployment growth, downsizing of state services, and lowering of real income, accompanied by sharp growth in the cost of living in the former Soviet bloc (Verdery 1996, Fodor 2006, Kovacs and Verdery 2000, Szlai 2000). And as many observers note, the fast restructuring of the postsocialist economies reflected more heavily on some groups than on others: social stratification and inequalities widened the gap between different segments of the population. In parallel with the old elites, new elites from different ideological backgrounds came into existence. The Bulgarian private sector, for example, produced new population groups like managers, businessmen, and “yuppies” who were educated abroad, professing and representing new economic and social practices.

Observers of these processes show how they have influenced men and women differently in the postsocialist context. Almost all agree that the loss of work affects women more than men. In her comparative study of job loss in Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Bulgaria, Christie Glass (2008) points out that during different periods of the “transition,” men and women in these countries lost their jobs for differing reasons and in varying proportions. And while in Bulgaria there was no difference between men, women, and women with small children in 1993 as far as job loss was concerned, when unemployment jumped from 14% to 33% in 2000 (Glass 2008:766), the number of women who lost their jobs rose twofold, while women with small children had a three times lesser chance of finding work (Glass 2008:772). In addition, women were directly affected by the reduction or the cancellation of social provisions such as state allowances for children, maternity leaves, and job protection after maternity leave. These resulted from the lack or the cutting-down of state finances, inflation, and changes in policies. And while in recent literature poverty in postsocialist societies is mostly associated with women (Glass 2000, Fodor 1996), not all women become equally poor. Thus, the processes of postsocialist transformation precondition the crumbling away of many different economic and social trajectories: some groups fall through, while new opportunities are created for others.

In the midst of the major social changes currently influencing all aspects of Bulgarian society, in the public discourse the family is still conceptualized as an institution that offers a connection and continuity with the past. The general perception is that what is changing is the “public,” not the “private” family. While state institutions are regarded with distrust by almost all segments of Bulgarian postsocialist society, the family, more generally, is still

being idealized. In the public discourse it is still perceived as a refuge – albeit not any longer from the powerful socialist state, but rather from the fragmented postsocialist state and the insecurities of the labor market. The notion of the family as a stable, peaceful space continues to exist despite the dramatic rise of divorces and the refusal of many couples to get officially married. The family was idealized by both the men and the women with whom I conversed at the “Lozenets” neighborhood playgrounds. All participants in my questionnaires and interviews confirmed, without exception, that family is their major priority, and that everything else – work, career, personal development, and so forth – comes second. And although public and individual perceptions present the postsocialist family as similar to the universal model from state socialism, my ethnographic study shows that the “practice” of the contemporary urban family happens along the lines of several structurally different scenarios.

Scenario 1: Traditional Family Relations

I begin with a case in which the mother does not work until her child reaches at least two years of age and the father works full time. The mother receives 90% of her salary within a 12-month period after the birth of the child, and then receives a minimum wage of 240 leva until the child reaches two years of age.⁵ While the pre-1989 social policies of the Bulgarian state protected a mother’s job until she came back from maternity leave (usually three full years (Daskalova 2000)), nowadays this social provision is often compromised by the employers. Women who work in the private sector and have used their full maternity leave almost always lose their jobs.

The women that I interviewed are aware of the fact that they will not be able to return to their previous jobs after maternity leave and have actually made this choice because they find their work to be very stressful and demanding of effort and time that they are no longer willing to put in. One of my informants shared that she was a worker in a clothing factory where she became a supervisor of over thirty seamstresses after several years.⁶ Because the factory received orders done with clients’ materials, this meant that when the order came in it had to be finalized in a very short time. When that happened, the women had to work overtime, often at night, while their efforts were not paid accordingly. Although this woman’s employer had encouraged her to have children and promised to keep her job, she now says that she does not want to return there anymore. Neither does she want to return as a part-time worker for a salary of 300 leva because, as she says, this money will not cover the

fee for a private kindergarten.⁷ At the moment she is taking care of her daughter (one year and eight months old) at home and does not know if her daughter will be accepted at a state kindergarten next year.⁸ The woman does not know, either, what she would do after her daughter grows up, but she knows for sure that she does not want to work at a stressful job anymore.

Another woman in a similar situation has a university degree and worked as a graphic designer until the birth of her child. For four years now she has not been working and has been raising her child at home. She also shared that her previous job was very hard and tiring. She worked at an office with fixed business hours, but when large orders came, she took her work home and spent all night completing the projects. She said that this work regime was very hard, and that she was tired constantly and had sleep and health problems. A year ago she found a job as a part-time graphic designer, but her salary was 300 leva; and not only could she not take care of her child, but she also had to pay extra for a private kindergarten. According to her, that arrangement did not make much sense and she gave up that job. Her daughter, who is three years and eight months old, was not accepted at a state kindergarten. When the child was two years old, she attended a state kindergarten for a while, but because the family refused to pay bribes to the kindergarten personnel, they were asked to leave.⁹ The woman does not know how long she will be taking care of her child or what she will do with her career in the future. She is only certain that she does not want to work at a stressful full-time job, and she furthermore adds: “Seeing how hard it is to raise one child, I don’t think that there will be another.”

In these families, the fathers are responsible for the family budget. They are not only the sole providers of income, but are also the ones who make decisions about how the family money is spent. The mothers shared that their husbands decide what kind of food is bought for the family. The husbands also shop, pay the bills, and give their wives small allowances for everyday expenses. One of the women said that when she is shopping for food, her husband does not approve of her choices, and that is why only he buys the food now. The husbands work late (one of them fixes motorcycles; the other writes and takes photographs for different magazines) and do almost nothing connected to housework or child care. At home, these husbands sometimes do activities that they consider pleasurable when they feel like it. For example, cooking and cleaning the dishes is often mentioned, but the women clarify that this happens when their husbands are asked repeatedly or because “eating concerns him.” Housework – such as cleaning, washing, and tidying the house – is done exclusively by the women. One woman shared that sometimes she asks her husband to do

something in the house, but he refuses and she does not want to pressure him since “he is the one who brings the money in the house, right?”

There is a similar situation where childcare is concerned. And while it seems that women do not mind doing almost all of the housework (they themselves estimate that they do between 95% to 99% of it), the fact that the fathers do not pay much attention to their children bothers them. The women in this parenting scenario explain with dissatisfaction that the fathers do not take care of their children. In the rare cases that they do, it is when the activity is considered “pleasant” or “restful” by the fathers, such as taking the child for a walk or taking them to the playground where the father sits on a bench and sips a beer while watching his child play. These are the situations in which I have often seen these fathers. More involved care activities – which include feeding, dressing, bathing, and the unusually time-consuming activity of putting the child to sleep several times a day – are done exclusively by the mothers. (One woman gave this example of a father’s engagement: “If you want to pee, go to your mommy.”) Another woman says: “He does not take care of the child at all; he changed diapers twice because my waist was hurting from the constant bending over and I asked him to do it. Before, he used to put the child to sleep; now he does not do even that.” What bothers these women most is that the fathers do not take part in the upbringing of their children. “The constant care for the child tires me and exhausts me. When I complain to my husband, he says: *you have not taught this child anything, let me teach her things*, but he never does it. He is not teaching the child anything, he does not even read tales to her.”

Rather interesting is the almost universal way in which women of this group describe their husbands. Besides the concealed dissatisfaction with the minimal participation of their husbands in the private sphere, the women describe their husbands as spoiled, absent-minded, impatient, quick-tempered, and incapable or unwilling to do things associated with their children or their homes. There are, of course, different variations of this inherited from the state socialist model of the “big child.” One woman shared: “He prefers to not stay alone with the child. When that happens, it is because I have decided to stay in and rest. Once he had to stay alone with the child for one week and he did fine. He can perform every child-caring activity, but his patience flies away quickly and he prefers that I do everything. He is absent-minded [and] forgets stuff.” Another woman said: “I can’t rely on him. I prefer to leave the child with her grandmothers, if I have to. He does not know how to do certain things; he is absent-minded, he will forget something. I am afraid to leave the child alone with him.”

In these cases, as with the other studied cases, grandmothers have minimal participation or no participation at all in child raising. Most elderly women still work or live outside Sofia, or sometimes the parents simply do not want grandparents to participate in child-rearing. In contrast to the socialist past when grandmothers often were primary caretakers since both parents were obliged to work by law, nowadays fewer elderly women take active participation in their grandchildren's upbringing.

As can be seen in this scenario, two similar yet complementary ideologies regarding family relations are interwoven – one inherited from state socialism, the other also related to the socialist past, but possible in practice only after 1989. In both of these perceptions, the spheres of self-realization for men and women are clearly defined by the private-public dichotomy. As during state socialism, in this current type of family relations men are exclusively associated with their work outside the home (the public), and women are associated with child-raising and housework (the private). These stereotypes of men's and women's roles are also encouraged by the conservative bourgeois model of the housewife and the bread-winning husband which spread throughout Eastern Europe and Bulgaria after the beginning of the postsocialist transformations. And while women did not have the choice of staying home and being housewives during socialism, after 1989 this possibility was perceived by many segments of Bulgarian society not only as “natural,” but also as an opportunity long denied. Thus, for many women in Bulgaria, staying home and being a housewife is a “natural” right, “modern” choice, and oftentimes a symbol of high social status.

Public and private do not mix in this scenario, and the roles of men and women are defined according to traditional gender stereotypes. The “big child” husband cannot and does not want to participate in the private, domestic sphere, while the “bourgeois” housewife does not work and takes care of the house. This scenario could be quite successful for families in which the husband has a well-paid job and can hire paid help – such as a house cleaner, a cook, or a babysitter – as well as spend money on holidays, sports, hobbies, and entertainment for his wife. (In Bulgaria, many public figures, such as models or people in the entertainment industry, profess their aspirations toward this model of family relations.) In families where the husband has a low-paid or unstable job, however, all of house duties are performed by the wife alone. The husband cannot provide paid help for his wife to relieve her of house and child-rearing responsibilities. At the same time, because of the reduced or non-existent state provisions for mothers of young children, the women become completely dependent on their husbands, as do the children on their parents.

As seen in the interviews, women in this scenario are exhausted, bored, and unhappy with their situation and with their husbands. The “big child” model of a husband does not seem to be very successful or desired by women in postsocialist Bulgaria. This is confirmed by their apathy and lack of clarity about their future and by the unwillingness of the interviewed women to have a second child. In this scenario, the level of education of both parents does not seem to influence family relations or practices. I noticed the highest level of tension between spouses in these families. Also, these women most often expressed feelings of despair and depression. Although in this scenario women make the autonomous choice to stay home and take care of their young children, this autonomy comes at a high price. On the one hand, the state cannot provide help in raising children and alleviating housework. On the other hand, their husbands also cannot or do not want to offer help. Thus, these women find themselves in the difficult situation of being doubly neglected.

Scenario 2: Active Parenting and Competitive Family Relations

In this scenario, the mother does not work or works part-time. The father supports the family almost exclusively but also takes care of the child before or after work and on weekends, and additionally does housework when he is at home. In this group of families I had the chance to observe and talk to the mothers as well as to the fathers. From the interviews it became apparent that the social capital of the parents (education, mobility, social networks) accumulated before the birth of the child and the shared perception of belonging to a certain social segment play a major role in the configuration of gender roles in the family. Here, I focus on two families who share self-perceptions which I find similar to those of the Western “middle class.”

In one of the families the mother is a lawyer and the father, who is trained in chemistry, lived for many years in Poland and England. Currently he works in a firm that trades between Bulgaria and Poland (9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.), and the mother works part-time as a lawyer in a big law firm (9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.) Their daughter, who is two and a half years old, has been looked after by a nanny (9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.) since she was nine months old and her mother returned to work. In the afternoons, the mother takes care of the child, and after 5:00 p.m. – when the father gets home – either the whole family or just the father and his daughter go out for a walk. The mother says that she returned to work not only because she wanted their child to be independent and to be able to communicate with other people, but also because she wants to work. She considers her work to be interesting (she

does investigative research on cases for the firm) and thinks that for the time she spends at work, she labors just as much as when she was working full time. This mother is different from the mothers in the previous group (Scenario 1) in that she actively practices sports, is interested in fashion, and goes out with friends. That is, she has the time, desire, and opportunity to do things related to her own body, interests, entertainment, and self-development.

The father in this family spends almost all of his free time with his daughter. Besides playing soccer with friends once a week (who are also fathers of small children), he takes his daughter for walks, actively participates in playground games, and does potty training; dresses, feeds, and puts his daughter to sleep; and takes her to the doctor and almost everywhere the family goes (on vacations, to visit friends, to do other activities). He knows his daughter's friends and their parents well. On weekends the whole family does things together, such as visiting the zoo with other families and their young children. According to my observations, and also according to the words of the mother and the father himself, the father can perform all household duties. He cooks, washes the clothes, cleans the dishes, and often cleans the whole house. Most of the household chores are done by the mother, of course, since she spends more time at home – although it seems that both spouses do housework interchangeably.

In the other family discussed in this scenario, the mother is an architect and the father is a regional manager of a construction supplies firm. When their son was born (he is currently two years and two months old), the mother took maternity leave until the child turned one. After that, she returned to full-time work for nine months, during which time a nanny took care of their son. When the child turned one year and nine months old, raising their son and teaching him communication skills became especially important for the parents, and the mother quit her work again. She cannot return to the same firm where she worked before, but believes that she can find a “good” job easily in a similar firm when the child turns three. According to her partner (they are not officially married), although the mother had a larger salary than him, she decided that it was more important to take care of her child during this period, and now they are managing to live on his salary alone. Neither parent wants the grandmothers, who live outside Sofia, to take care of their son because they think the grandmothers would sabotage the requirements they have for raising their child, like teaching him nonviolence, following a vegetarian diet, not allowing him to watch TV, and teaching him to be “nice, calm, and independent.”

Every day after 5:30 p.m. the father takes his son out with him when he gets home from work. During that time, the mother takes a break and “does something around the house” because she has spent the whole day with the child. Every weekend, on holidays, and during vacation, I met the father and his son on the playgrounds in the “Lozenets” neighborhood. The father shared with me that he takes care of his son with enormous pleasure and added, “What do you expect me to say, that I like taking care of him? Well, I really enjoy spending time with him, it gives me great pleasure.” He also commented that their friends with young children rear them in a similar way (organic foods, nonviolence, active participation in children’s games, activities which exclude the television and computer, reading books, singing songs, and providing undivided attention to the children). Together with their friends and their children, they often go to the mountains around Bulgaria because they want the children to lead “natural” lives – to love, rather than hurt or eat animals, and to appreciate and preserve nature.

On working days the father estimates that he does about 10% of the household chores, while his partner does 90%. On weekends and holidays, they both share the household responsibilities. He considers his wife to be the primary caretaker of their child, but he wants to be, and is, an equal participant in all family decisions and practices. He is able to perform every duty related to the child and the house. Talking about the relations in their family, he shared – as later did his partner – that their partnership is based on an equal sharing of responsibilities and decisions.

In this scenario, the organization of gender relations in the family is grounded on shared perceptions of belonging to a certain social segment of Bulgarian society, which I can define as being closest to the notion of a Western “middle class.” Although almost none of the interviewees define their understandings in this way, from the interviews it becomes clear that the shared notions of social belonging include a “good” education, a “prestigious” career for both the men and the women, active participation in child-raising and homecare, and “modern” practices such as a health-oriented lifestyle or regular sports activities. In this scenario, the women remain at home because they have chosen to do so, although they often have better paid and more prestigious jobs than their male partners. Their decision to stay home comes from the shared conviction that although they have good education and career prospects, women are also the ones who are “naturally” connected to their children, and thus are the providers of “the best” care for them. This idea is not only inherited from patriarchal perceptions from before and during state socialism about the “natural role” of women, but also from stereotypes – borrowed from Western Europe after 1989 – in which middle class

men support their families while the women take care of the house and the children, at least for a certain period of time. The difference is that when this period for child-raising – perceived as “obligatory” – is over (the child’s attainment of three years of age is most often mentioned by the interviewees), these women can go back to the careers that they have postponed for the sake of the family. The men in this scenario do not debate postponing or giving up their careers for the family’s sake. The social capital of the women allows them to be flexible and autonomous in their decisions. They are dependent on their male partners for a certain period of time, and after that, on their own capabilities and the labor market. These women do not rely on state support in their capacity as mothers of small children.

The self-image of the men in this scenario is quite interesting. While they remain the main “breadwinners” and performers in public, it seems that what I have observed might be described as the appearance of a new model of a “super-man.” The “super-men” financially support their families by working outside the home, and simultaneously realize themselves through involved participation in child-rearing and household labor. These men feel personal satisfaction and fulfillment when they combine a successful career with active partnership and fatherhood. This is a new image of manhood that is not related to the socialist past, but rather to the social identification of the men. It seems that most of the men that I interviewed construct and perceive this image with enthusiasm and pleasure.

The “super-man” model is becoming part of the public debate in Bulgaria, as well. In a recent talk on National Radio, a man shared that he had given up his financial consulting career so that he could take care of his young child (the man kept his share in the firm, which brings the family a decent income). This man said that, for example, there are no Internet forums through which fathers can exchange ideas about raising children; nor are there any practical facilities for “active fathers,” such as diaper-changing tables in public restrooms for men. This statement shows that there is a new tendency among “active fathers,” which is the declared intention to have a say in their child’s upbringing in the private space, whereas previously this had traditionally been ascribed to women. It is precisely in this sphere where conflicts among members of Scenario 2 arise most often: such conflicts are usually power clashes regarding ideas on how to take better care of children and who takes better care of them, and how to organize and present the family home. Thus, the private sphere, as opposed to the unified socialist “us,” provides a space for debate and internal conflicts. It becomes an arena in which both men and women are active and debate competing ideas that come from positions of equal power. This specific dynamic is based to a large extent on ideas of competitiveness, taking initiative, and even aggressiveness associated with the social

identification of the participants. And when both men and women have successful careers and participate actively at home, the private-public dichotomy gives ground to competing images and practices between them. Partners in these families do not depend that much on either the state or each other; rather, they depend on their individual social resources, which are necessary for supporting the ideologies and dynamics within these families.

Scenario 3: Equal Partnership and Flexibility

This scenario describes a family situation in which notions from socialist models, as well as egalitarian ideas of gender relations, are entangled with practices of flexible utilization of temporary and part-time jobs in the postsocialist labor market. In this situation, men and women equally share the time and effort that they invest inside and outside of the home. There are men who take care of their children and their homes more than their partners do. This is possible because the men either work on an irregular schedule or part-time, or do not work at all. Such practices are based on shared ideas of a “harmonious” family, equal partnership, and flexible utilization of “public” resources for the construction and support of the “private” home space.

In one of the cases, the father is a fireman who works 24 hours and rests 72 hours. His wife is an accountant and the main financial provider and works until 7:00 p.m. The father is the primary caretaker of his one year and eight months old daughter. When he is on duty, he asks his mother-in-law to take care of the child. While sharing his thoughts about looking after his daughter, he said that he really likes the fact that he takes care of the child and that she behaves well with him, but not so well with her mother. The father tends to the child from the time she wakes: he dresses her, changes her diapers, and feeds her until she goes to sleep after lunch. In the afternoon, all of these activities are repeated, and the child often falls asleep at night without seeing her mother during the day. While the child is taking her afternoon nap, the father cleans and tidies the house, washes the clothes, and sometimes cooks.

In another case, the father is a DJ who has worked only on Friday and Saturday nights since his two year and eight months old son was born. (Before that he worked during the week, as well). His wife, who is expecting their second child, is a painter and decorator who makes jewelry at home. The family income comes equally from both parents. The father takes care of the child almost exclusively and is proud to be part of his upbringing:

My wife asks me how I know these things (about raising children) – “you don’t read books,” she says – and I tell her that I just rely on my intuition. I fight a lot with my wife and mother-in-law about their forceful methods of feeding the child. I just let him ask me for food and he himself comes in a couple of minutes and wants to be fed. It is the same thing with putting the clothes on and changing the diapers.

The father’s “life philosophy” is that, at 45, he has realized that his life is meaningless: he spent his youth having a good time with friends and got everything that he wanted (“5,000 discs with music collected since 1984!”). He says: “I told my girlfriend, let’s get married and have children. When I die, what will remain after me? 5,000 discs with music, a nice car, and now two little people. I am very artistic, I sing, I dance, and I will pass that on to the little ones. It will be very hard for us with the two children, but I take it as my destiny.”

A third case in Scenario 3 is related to the fact that between 2008 and 2009, some men lost their jobs as a consequence of Bulgaria’s difficult economic situation. The man in this case was a translator for the leading steel company in Bulgaria until the early summer of 2009, when he was laid off. Since the fall of 2009, he has been teaching English at an elite Sofia high school. When his daughter turned two (currently she is two years and five months old), his wife returned to work in a bookstore, where her hours are from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Before the child was born, the wife worked in an advertising agency where her job was very stressful, and she thus decided that she no longer wanted to live under such pressure. She prefers to live and raise her child in a stress-free atmosphere. The father shared that the family income is divided equally between him and his wife, and that he is the one who takes care of the child exclusively. Every task related to the child is performed by him. When the child goes to kindergarten next year, he will take her to and from school. He said that he does not get tired and likes taking care of his daughter. His wife took care of their child until she reached two, but the father says that “now I am looking after her.”

At home, the father does all of the household chores by himself. As far as his wife is concerned, he says that he understands that it is really hard and tiring to do the same thing (taking care of a young child) for two whole years; and that is why he is currently caring for his daughter. He does not find the work to be hard, tiresome, or boring. According to his wife and himself, all of their responsibilities and decisions are shared equally: both parents can take each other’s place at home, whether with the child, or as financial providers. This

family, as well as the families from the previous scenario, would like to have a second child in the future.

In this third scenario, there are families in which both parents manage to find part-time jobs. In this case, the parents constantly rotate their child care responsibilities: one of the parents takes care of the child in the mornings, while the other does so in the afternoons. In several interviews, people mentioned that switching places is done at the house door when one parent is leaving for work and the other is coming home.

In this third scenario, family relations are grounded in shared ideas and practices of equal partnership, as well as on the construction of the family as the main space for self-realization and as a source of harmony and peace. As part of this arrangement, women decide how long they want to be primary caretakers of their children after birth. The men in this scenario comply with their wives' wishes and take full responsibility for the house and the children when their wives decide to return to work. These fathers are not as obviously enthusiastic about taking care of their children as the fathers from the previous scenario, but rather perceive it as "fate" and a "responsibility that they can manage" like everything else. As opposed to the previous scenario, where men with "good jobs" were not willing to compromise their careers for their family and instead combined work with household duties and child care, here the situation is just the opposite. The men have either stopped working or changed their work schedule to be more flexible, or have changed their activities so that they can best accommodate themselves and their wives in their child-rearing responsibilities. The partnership between wives and husbands is not based on shared perceptions of social identification and "modern" practices, but rather on shared images of "family harmony" grounded in equal partnership.

Although rare, there were similar cases during state socialism where fathers had "artistic" professions – such as work in the cinema, theater, or the media – and combined these with egalitarian ideas about family relations. Here, as with the socialist "us," the family was constructed as an intimate safe-house, opposed to the "unimportant" outside world. But the difference from the socialist model now is that men can also actively participate in the realization of the intimate "us" perception. This is possible because the men and women in these families become practically interchangeable in the "private" sphere and in their relations with the "public sphere." The "public" is conceptualized as the "necessary evil," as a resource needed for the support of the "harmonious private," and is not perceived by the participants as a space for self-fulfillment.

These families seem to be very united and plan to raise more children. The practical dependency and interchangeability of the men and women makes them quite resilient to the dynamics of the outside world. And although their work activities are in most cases temporary and part-time, they make their choices so that they can invest their effort and time in the private sphere, which is important to them. In these cases, parenting and work practices can be seen as indicative of how families can utilize temporary and oftentimes low-paid jobs and professions in order to create a space in which they feel peaceful and rewarded.

Conclusion

After 1989, the dramatic restructuring of the labor market, the stratification of Bulgarian society, and the reduction of social provisions for parents with small children led to a reconfiguration of previous models of gender relations and parenting patterns in one of the centrally located neighborhoods in Sofia, but also in other urban contexts. While during socialism the model of the urban family was almost universal and perceptions of the role of men and women were defined by the contradictory female model of the “worker mother” and the male “head of the household,” in the current stage of Bulgarian postsocialist transformation various strategies, ideologies, images, and gender practices precondition different life trajectories for families with children three years of age and younger. Some of the images and practices, like the “big child” and the conservative stereotype of the “natural vocation” of women, are transmitted into postsocialist urban families. At the same time, the stratification of income in urban Bulgaria – together with the influx of various Western practices and ideologies, like the bourgeois notion of the housewife, or the ideas of Western “middle class” – have intermixed with previous models to create new and different practices of gender relations and parenting patterns in postsocialist families. New heroes have been constructed – like the “super-man” and the “equal partner” – and have positioned postsocialist men in the sphere of the “private,” where they can practice new activities and identities as involved fathers and spouses. What is observed is a mixing, entangling, and refiguring of gender practices and perceptions as active responses of individuals to the dynamic life of postsocialist Bulgaria.

Feminist literature on the transformations in Eastern Europe focuses mostly on the negative changes in women’s lives and on the new practices of gender inequalities in postsocialist societies (Fuszara 2000, Daskalova 2000). By contrast, my study shows that, in the context of urban postsocialist families, competitive as well as egalitarian models of family

relations are being constructed. These practices have also been made possible by the creation of new roles that associate some men in Bulgaria with active participation in the family.

Notes

¹ Many thanks to Emily Young for her editorial assistance with this article.

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³ I use "urban" to signify various economic and social aspects that shape cultural systems and identities in cities (e.g. work outside the home, separate living arrangements for the nuclear family, limited networking and assistance from the extended family, etc.), and contrast them to rural forms and processes of life.

⁴ The "Lozenets" neighborhood is centrally located and is considered to be one of the more affluent living areas in Sofia. In the past twenty years there has been a lot of movement in and out of the neighborhood, and the cost of property has risen to one of the highest in the country. It is also perceived as prestigious to own or rent in this neighborhood. The "older" owners of apartments in "Lozenets" are from different social backgrounds, while the new owners or renters come from the more affluent segments of the population in Sofia and around the country.

⁵ 240 leva is equal to about 172 U.S. dollars. The dollar-leva exchange rate varies: currently 1 USD equals approximately 1.40 leva.

⁶ There are not yet any clear-cut criteria that define class stratification in Bulgaria. Some of the more important characteristics that may signify social position are education, income, job, and area of residence, but they rarely come together in one person's biography. For example, someone may have a degree in humanities, perform unqualified work which is better paid, and live in an inherited apartment in an affluent neighborhood, or someone may have no higher education but still own a prosperous firm. Only people to whom none of the above characteristics apply are looked down upon, while those who exhibit more of the above characteristics are considered as well-to-do and "middle class." The rest are perceived on the basis of personal interaction.

⁷ The state kindergarten system was created during socialism to assist families as they performed their obligatory work duties. It covered children from 3 to 6 or 7 years of age. The majority of Bulgarian children went to state kindergartens for a symbolic price. Presently, the kindergarten system is owned and managed by the municipalities and provides care and food for children from the morning hours until 6 p.m. for the approximate price of \$25 per month. For that reason, municipal kindergartens are preferred by parents who both work because of the impossibility of maintaining a family budget on a single income. However, because of the large labor migration from villages and small towns into Bulgaria's larger cities, the

kindergarten system cannot provide services to all who need them. Thus, for the past fifteen years in Sofia and other large Bulgarian cities, private kindergartens have opened and charged much higher prices, ranging from \$250 to \$500 per month. Parents' opinions on both types of kindergartens vary. While some think that private kindergartens ask for too much money without providing qualitatively different care than their municipal counterparts, others believe that private kindergartens provide much better care for children, mainly because their groups are smaller. Since the average salary in Bulgaria is 460 leva, few families can afford to send their children to private kindergartens.

⁸ Accessibility to state kindergartens in Sofia is a serious problem for parents: there are not enough kindergartens due to the post-1989 influx of people from all over the country looking for jobs in Sofia.

⁹ The corruption level in state kindergartens has risen not only in Sofia but in other big cities where the scarcity of these institutions has provoked high social tensions.

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