

# WHY WOMEN HAVE BETTER SEX UNDER SOCIALISM

AND OTHER ARGUMENTS FOR  
ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

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**Elena Lagadinova (right, with Angela Davis) (1930–2017):** The youngest female partisan fighting against Bulgaria's Nazi-allied monarchy during World War II. She earned her PhD in agrobiolgy and worked as a research scientist before she became the president of the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement. Lagadinova led the Bulgarian delegation to the 1975 United Nations First World Conference on Women. Because free markets discriminate against those who bear children, Lagadinova believed that only state intervention could support women in their dual roles as workers and mothers. *Courtesy of Elena Lagadinova.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

For the last twenty years, I have studied the social impacts of the political and economic transition from state socialism to capitalism in Eastern Europe. Although I first traveled through the region just months after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, my professional interest began in 1997, when I started conducting research on the impacts of the collapse of communist ideology on ordinary people. First as a PhD student and later as a university professor, I lived for more than three years in Bulgaria and nineteen months in both eastern and western Germany. In the summer of 1990, I also spent two months traveling through Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the soon-to-disappear German Democratic Republic. In the intervening years, I've been a frequent visitor to Eastern Europe, delivering invited lectures in cities such as Belgrade, Bucharest, Budapest, and Warsaw. Because I often travel by car, bus, and train, I've seen firsthand the ravages of neoliberal capitalism across the region: bleak landscapes pockmarked with the decrepit remains of once thriving factories giving way to new suburbs with Walmart-style mega-stores selling forty-two different types of shampoo. I've also studied how the institution of unregulated free markets in

Eastern Europe returned many women to a subordinate status, economically dependent on men.

Since 2004, I've published six scholarly books and over three dozen articles and essays, using empirical evidence gathered from archives, interviews, and extended ethnographic fieldwork in the region. In this book, I draw on over twenty years of research and teaching to write an introductory primer for a general audience interested in European socialist feminist theories, the experience of twentieth-century state socialism, and their lessons for the present day. After the unexpected success of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primaries, socialist ideas are circulating more broadly among the American public. It is essential that we pause and learn from the experiences of the past, examining both good and bad. Because I believe in the pursuit of historical nuance, and that there were some redeeming qualities of state socialism, I will inevitably be accused of being an apologist for Stalinism. Vitriolic *ad hominem* attacks are the reality of our hyperpolarized political climate, and I find it quite ironic that those who claim to abhor totalitarianism have no trouble silencing speech or unleashing hysterical Twitter mobs. The German political theorist Rosa Luxemburg once said: "Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently." This book is about learning to think differently with regard to the state socialist past, our neoliberal capitalist present, and the path to our collective future.

Throughout this book, I use the term "state socialism" or "state socialist" to refer to the states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union dominated by ruling Communist Parties where political freedoms were curtailed. I use the

term "democratic socialism" or "democratic socialist" to refer to countries where socialist principles are championed by parties that compete in free and fair elections and where political rights are maintained. Although many parties referred to themselves as "communist," that term denotes the ideal of a society where all economic assets are collectively owned and the state and law have withered away. In no case has real communism been achieved, and therefore I try to avoid this term when referring to actually existing states.

On the topic of semantics, I have also endeavored to be sensitive to contemporary intersectional vocabularies. For example, when I talk about "women" in this book, I am primarily referring to cisgender women. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialist "woman question" did not consider the unique needs of trans women, but I have no desire to exclude or alienate trans women from the current discussion. Similarly, in my discussion of maternity, I do recognize that I am discussing those who are female-assigned-at-birth (FAB), but for the sake of simplicity, I use the word "woman" even though this category includes some who identify as men or other genders.

Because this is an introductory book, there will be places in the text where I don't go into full detail about the debates surrounding topics such as Universal Basic Income (UBI), surplus value extraction, or gender-based quotas. In particular, although I believe that they are absolutely essential, I don't spend a lot of time discussing universal single-payer health care or free public postsecondary education, because I feel these policies have been discussed at length elsewhere. I hope readers are inspired to explore more about the issues raised within these pages, taking this

book as an invitation for further exploration of the intersections of socialism and feminism. I also want to make it clear that this is not a scholarly treatise; those in search of theoretical frameworks and methodological debates should consult the books I've published with university presses. I also recognize the long and important tradition of Western socialist feminism, although it is not discussed in these pages. I encourage interested readers to refer to the books listed in the suggestions for further reading.

For all of the direct quotations and statistical claims made throughout the book, I include consolidated citations in an endnote at the end of the relevant paragraph. Few substantive endnotes accompany this text, so most readers can feel free to ignore the endnotes unless they have a question about a particular source. General historical material can be found in the suggestions for further reading. When discussing personal anecdotes, I have changed the names and identifying details to preserve anonymity.

Finally, with the many social ills plaguing the world today, some might find the chapters on intimate relations a bit too prurient for their taste; some might think that having better sex is a trivial reason to switch economic systems. But turn on the television, open a magazine, or surf the internet, and you will find a world saturated with sex. Capitalism has no problem commodifying sexuality and even preying on our relationship insecurities to sell us products and services we don't want or need. Neoliberal ideologies persuade us to view our bodies, our attentions, and our affections as things to be bought and sold. I want to turn the tables. To use the discussion of sexuality to expose the shortcomings of unfettered free markets. If we can better

understand how the current capitalist system has co-opted and commercialized basic human emotions, we have taken the first step toward rejecting market valuations that purport to quantify our fundamental worth as human beings. The political is personal.



**Lily Braun** (1865–1916): Feminist writer and a politician within the German Social Democratic Party. Her 1901 book, *The Women's Question: Historical Development and Economic Aspect* proposed many novel solutions to the challenges faced by working mothers, including proposals for what she called "maternity insurance." Braun was a moderate and a reformer and did not believe that revolution was necessary to achieve socialism. *Courtesy of Lebendiges Museum Online (Deutsches Historisches Museum).*

## 2 WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING EXPLOITATION: ON MOTHERHOOD

One of my childhood friends, whom I will call Jake, hungered for financial success in a society where financial success reflected a kind of moral superiority. Jake valorized the idea of the American Dream. He saw goodness in the kind of Horatio Alger, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps hard work required to "make something" of yourself. Back then, I was already a feminist with concerns about economic inequality, while Jake, true to the spirit of the 1980s, believed that whoever dies with the most toys wins. We spent hours debating the pros and cons of capitalism, and the ways that Thatcherism and Reaganomics sucked or didn't suck. Jake embraced the Gordon Gekko zeitgeist of the age: "Greed is good." I wasn't buying it. But back in those days when domestic politics weren't so polarized, we managed to maintain our friendship throughout our college years. In the 1990s, while I was off teaching English and reading Karl Polanyi in Japan, Jake was hustling his way up the corporate ladder at a tech start-up.

One day in 1997, Jake informed me with great pleasure that he'd hired a promising young woman for a strategic position in his firm. She'd been a finalist with two other men, and with my voice ringing in his ears, he decided to take a chance on her. "They were all equally qualified on paper," he told me, "But after years of listening to your feminist rants, I convinced my boss that since women face so many barriers in tech, she had actually worked harder to get where she was than the men in the pool." I was struggling through my first year of graduate school at the time, and Jake's news warmed my heart; I'd made a little difference in the world.

Over the next few years, the woman proved herself clever, competent, and hard-working. Jake's company gave her a three-month paid sabbatical for some additional training, grooming her for a promotion. Then she announced she was pregnant. The start-up had no formal maternity leave policy, but Jake asked his boss to give her twelve paid weeks to stay home with her baby and make child care arrangements. Jake argued that they had already invested so much money in her training that a twelve-week leave would pay for itself in the long run. His boss reluctantly agreed.

The woman returned to work after the birth of her baby and tried her best to keep up with the demands of a small start-up. But she was nursing. And the baby kept her up at night. She would attend meetings bleary-eyed and unprepared. She called in sick when the nanny didn't show. She found a place in a good nursery, but if her son got sick, they sent him home. Her husband traveled for business, and she had no family in the area. Jake, always the optimist, believed things would improve once the child was older. He

even offered to babysit in a pinch. His star employee managed to hold on for six months. Then she quit.

That night Jake called me to share the news. Dejected and frustrated, he told me, "I'm never hiring a woman again."

"But she's just one woman," I said. "Not every woman is going to make her choice."

"There's no way my boss will let me," he said. His voice was low. "And it's the baby thing. I can't be sure of anything about any employee, but I can be certain that a man won't have a baby."



I think I hung up on him. But it really wasn't Jake's fault. What could he do in a system that provides no support for women when they become mothers, that forces women to choose between their careers and their families? Economists call this "statistical discrimination." The basic idea is that since employers can't directly observe the productivity of individual workers, they can make observations about demographic characteristics that are correlated with worker productivity. They make decisions based on the averages: if women are more likely to quit than men for personal reasons, employers assume that any given woman is more likely to quit than a man. Economists observe that the theory of statistical discrimination can create a vicious cycle. If women are (or used to be) more likely to quit, they will be paid less. If they are paid less, they are more likely to quit. This vicious cycle provides a very good justification for government intervention.<sup>1</sup>

The perception of women's comparative inferiority as workers is linked to their biological capacity for child bearing and nursing, and the concomitant social expectation that women will be the primary caregivers for babies and young children. And in some patriarchal fantasy world, our supposedly innate caring nature also makes us perfectly suited for nursing other sick, weak, or aged relatives. And since women are at home anyway, so the argument goes, we might as well do all of the shopping, cooking, cleaning, and emotional labor required to maintain a household, right? Someone has to do it, and that someone is almost always a woman, in part because the location of the tasks align, but also because she has been socialized from infancy to believe that it's her natural role. Baby dolls, EZ Bake ovens, and toy vacuum cleaners allow girls to play-practice the labors they will perform when they grow up.

Employers discriminate against those whose bodies can produce children because society attributes certain characteristics to the owners of those bodies. When scholars talk about men and women, they often make a distinction between the terms "sex" and "gender." The word "sex" means the biological difference between males and females and the word "gender" connotes the social roles that cultures expect to match the biology. For example, by sex I am a woman because I have the physiological equipment necessary for baby manufacturing, but my gender is also female because in many ways I conform to contemporary American society's imagination of what a woman should be: I have long hair; I wear skirts, jewelry, and makeup; I enjoy romantic comedies and nice bath products; and although I might claim it's for my general health, I do a daily hour on the elliptical

trainer because I worry about my weight (okay, well, maybe it's only forty-five minutes, and it's not every day, but you get the idea). In other ways, however, my gender identity is more masculine: I have always worked full-time and earned my own money; I enjoy watching soccer, science fiction, and action movies; I love a good beer; and although I try to be polite about it, I always speak my mind even if my thoughts and opinions may offend. I suffer no fools, while according to some, real women tolerate gropers, mansplainers, and plain old idiots with a smile.

Gender discrimination arises because society constructs archetypes of the ideal man and the ideal woman based on their supposedly natural biological differences. This is not to say that men and women are the same—they are not—but only that our beliefs about how men and women behave are a figment of our collective imaginations—a powerful figment, yes, but a figment nonetheless. When a student ranks a professor with a female name lower than a professor with a male name, the student may assume that the male professor has more time and energy to dedicate to his teaching because he is not distracted by his care obligations outside of work. When employers like my friend Jake's boss see a woman's name on a job application, they immediately think that "woman" equals potential mother with priorities in life that take precedence over their careers. Employers also assume that men will put their careers over their families because they are supposedly less biologically attached to children. It doesn't matter if individual men decide to stay home with their children or if individual women sterilize themselves to overcome the challenges of work/family balance; our gender stereotypes of how men and women

behave are rooted in our ideas about the "natural" link between biological sex and how this informs our life choices.

I used to do a classroom exercise with my students to get them to think about the relationship between sex and gender. I borrowed a scenario from Ursula Le Guin's classic science fiction novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where a man from earth is sent to work on a planet of "bisexual hermaphrodites." This means that all people have both male and female sexual organs and hormones. Throughout the month, there are seven-day periods when a portion of the population experiences a form of heat: an irresistible desire to copulate. At the initiation of sexual contact, one of the members of the pair becomes the male, and the other person becomes the female. In any given sexual encounter, an individual will randomly become either the male or the female. The member of the pair who becomes female can become pregnant and will then have a nine-month gestation period before giving birth. When an individual is not copulating or pregnant, they revert to a neutral state until their next sexual encounter, when the process repeats. Any one individual can therefore be both a father and a mother, and everyone is equally "at risk" for pregnancy and childbirth.

I asked my students to try to imagine how the society on this fictional planet would be arranged compared to our society in the United States. The first thing to go would be sex discrimination, since everyone would be biologically identical. All people are "hermaphrodites," so you couldn't use biological sex to create hierarchies. Of course, more attractive "bisexual hermaphrodites" might enjoy more privileges than the ugly ones, and the old might have more power over the young, but discrimination would not

be based on whether you can make babies. Similarly, the social roles linked to biology would be the same for everyone, since most members of this society would be both mothers and fathers to multiple children. My students also imagined that the society on this fictional planet would be organized to accommodate the demands of pregnancy and childbirth, since every member of that society would benefit from collectively organized forms of support.



Socialists have long understood that creating equity between men and women despite their biological sex differences requires collective forms of support for child rearing. By the mid-nineteenth century, as women flooded into the industrial labor force of Europe, socialists theorized that you could not build strong worker's movements without the participation of women. The German feminist Lily Braun promoted the idea of a state-funded "maternity insurance" as early as 1897. In this scheme, working women would enjoy paid furloughs from their jobs both before and after delivery, with guarantees that their jobs would be held in their absence. It's important to remember that as late as 1891, in Germany female industrial workers toiled for a minimum of sixty-five hours per week, even if they were with child. Under these circumstances, pregnant women and girls stayed at the assembly line until they gave birth, and if they had no husband or family to support them, they returned to work soon afterward. The infant and maternal mortality rate for working women was more than double that of middle-class women because of the harsh conditions.

Although British and American feminists wanted to



support working mothers through nonstate charities, Braun proposed that funds for the maternity insurance be raised through a progressive income tax. The German government could then pay a woman's wages for a fixed period before and after the birth of her child. Everyone would contribute to a special pot of money that new mothers could draw on, much like unemployment insurance or a state pension. Braun asserted that since society benefitted from children, it should help bear the costs of raising them. Children are future soldiers, workers, and taxpayers. They are a benefit to all, not just to the parents who bring them into the world (and some parents of teenagers might argue that they are more of a benefit to society than they are to their parents). This is especially true in ethnically homogenous states, where societies place a premium on preserving a particular national identity.<sup>2</sup>

But Braun's proposal was expensive. It required new taxes and would redistribute wealth to the working classes, an idea that many middle-class men and women opposed. Braun's ideas also faced initial opposition from the Left. Because Braun was a reformer and believed that her maternity scheme could be implemented under capitalism, more radical German socialists like Clara Zetkin initially rejected her ideas, claiming they could only be realized under a socialist economy. Braun also favored communal living arrangements (communes) over state-funded nurseries and kindergartens, whereas Zetkin believed that housework and child care should be socialized. Nonetheless, Braun's proposals, in watered down form at least, were passed into law as early as 1899. And by the Second International Conference of Socialist Women in 1910, Braun's

ideas were incorporated into the official socialist platform with the support of Clara Zetkin and the Russian Alexandra Kollontai.

The fourth point on the 1910 socialist platform laid the foundation for all subsequent socialist policies regarding state responsibilities toward women workers. Under the title "Social Protection and Provision for Motherhood and Infants," the women of the Second International demanded an eight-hour working day. They proposed that pregnant women stop working (without previous notice) for eight weeks prior to the expected delivery date, and that women be granted a paid "motherhood insurance" of eight weeks if the child lived, which could be extended to thirteen weeks if the mother was willing and able to nurse the infant. Women would get a six-week leave for stillborn children, and all working women would enjoy these benefits, "including agricultural laborers, home workers and maid servants." These policies would be paid for by the permanent establishment of a special maternity fund out of tax revenues.<sup>3</sup>

Seven years later, Kollontai attempted to implement some of these policies in the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik revolution. Instead of burdening individual women with household chores and child care in addition to their industrial labor, the young Soviet state proposed to build kindergartens, crèches, children's homes, and public cafeterias and laundries. By 1919, the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party handed Kollontai a mandate to expand her work for Soviet women, and she secured state commitments to expend the funds necessary to build a wide network of social services. The year 1919 also saw the creation

of an organization called the Zhenotdel, the Women's Section, which would oversee the work of implementing the radical program of social reform that would lead to women's full emancipation.<sup>4</sup>

But Soviet enthusiasm for women's emancipation soon evaporated in the face of more pressing demographic, economic, and political concerns. After the country was devastated by the brutal years of the First World War, followed by the Civil War and the horrendous famine of 1921 and 1922, Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not have the funds to support Kollontai's plan. Hundreds of thousands of war orphans roamed the major cities, plaguing residents with petty crime and theft. The state lacked the resources to care for them; children's homes were overburdened and understaffed. Liberalization of divorce laws meant that fathers abandoned their pregnant wives, and poor enforcement of child support and alimony laws meant that those men who had survived the First World War, the Civil War, and the famine routinely skipped out on their responsibilities. Working women couldn't look after their children and hoped the state would step in and help, as Kollontai and the other women's activists had promised. In 1920, the Soviet Union had also become the first country in Europe to legalize abortion on demand during the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. Birthrates plummeted as women sought to limit the size of their families. Eventually there was fear that the falling birthrate combined with the devastations of war and famine would derail the country's plans for rapid modernization.<sup>5</sup>

No one ever wanted women's economic independence to come at the cost of motherhood, but this is what

happened. As the demands on Soviet women's time increased, they chose to delay or limit childbearing. Eventually, Stalin disbanded the Zhenotdel, declaring that the "woman question" had been solved. In 1936, he reversed most liberal policies, banned abortion, and reinstated the traditional family, on top of his sustained program of state terror and arbitrary purges. The rapidly industrializing Soviet state needed women to work, have babies, and do all of the care work the world's first socialist state could not yet afford to pay for. Soviet women were far from emancipated, and Alexandra Kollontai spent most of her remaining years in diplomatic exile.



While the Soviet experiment failed, Braun's ideas and the program of the socialist women in 1910 found fertile soil in the Scandinavian social democracies. The Danes introduced a two-week leave for working women as early as 1901, and by 1960 a universal, state-funded paid maternity leave was extended to all working women. In 1919, Finland passed maternity leave provisions for factory workers and professional women, and added job protections in 1922. Sweden introduced an unpaid maternity leave of four weeks as early as 1901, and by 1963, the government guaranteed women 180 days of job-protected maternity leave at 80 percent of their salaries. Compare this with the United States, which did not even pass a law outlawing discrimination against pregnant women until 1978. And American women didn't have a federal law for job-protected unpaid leave until 1993. We still don't have mandated paid maternity leave (but then again, we don't have mandated paid sick leave either).<sup>6</sup>

Eastern European countries also made early use of maternity leave provisions. Poland granted twelve weeks of fully paid maternity leave in 1924, but most countries introduced these provisions after World War II. These nations needed women to work because there was a shortage of male labor, but they had also invested heavily in women's education and professional training and did not want to lose their expertise (think back to Jake's reasoning in the beginning of this chapter). For example, the Czechoslovaks introduced the first maternity support policies in 1948, and by 1956 the Labor Code guaranteed women eighteen weeks of paid, job-protected leave. In Bulgaria, the 1971 constitution guaranteed women the right to maternity leaves. In 1973, Bulgarian women enjoyed a fully paid maternity leave of 120 days before and after the birth of the first child as well as an extra six months of leave paid at the national minimum wage. New mothers could also take unpaid leave until their child reached the age of three, when a place in a public kindergarten would be made available. Time on maternity leave counted as labor service toward a woman's pension, and all leaves were job-protected. Later, an amended law allowed fathers and grandparents to take parental leave in the place of the mother. The Bulgarians covered for those on parental leave with the labor of new university graduates. (In Bulgaria, postsecondary education was free for students who agreed to complete a period of mandatory national service after earning their degrees. These internships allowed young people to get work experience and ensured that a parent's job would be waiting when he or she returned from leave.)<sup>7</sup>

The 1973 Bulgarian Politburo decision also included language about reeducating men to be more active in the

home: "The reduction and alleviation of woman's household work depends greatly on the common participation of the two spouses in the organization of family life. It is therefore imperative: a) to combat outdated views, habits, and attitudes as regards the allocation of work within the family; b) to prepare young men for the performance of household duties from childhood and adolescence both by the school and society and by the family."<sup>8</sup>

In the pages of the Bulgarian women's magazine *The Woman Today*, editors published articles about men doing their fair share of the housework and encouraging men to be more active fathers to their children. In the Young Pioneers and the Komsomol, two gender-integrated youth organizations, boys and girls were socialized to treat each other as equals who both had important (albeit different) roles to play in building a socialist society. Where men did mandatory military service after secondary school, women's reproductive labors counted as an equivalent form of national service. In the end, these policies failed to challenge traditional gender roles, but it is important to recognize that there were at least attempts to redefine ideas about masculinity and femininity. Indeed, specific state efforts to encourage men to be more active fathers and participate more in housework can be found as early as the 1950s in Eastern Germany and Czechoslovakia. However, in the face of male recalcitrance, governments focused their efforts instead on the socialization of housework and child care, hoping to expand the network of communal kitchens and public laundries throughout the country.

As early as 1817, the British utopian socialist Robert Owen had suggested that children over the age of three

should be raised by local communities rather than in nuclear families, and this idea of the public provision of child care influenced all twentieth-century experiments with state socialism. In addition to maternity leaves, countries like Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, East Germany, and Yugoslavia invested state funds to expand the network of nursery schools (for children from birth to age three) and kindergartens (for children ages three to six) to support women's continued labor force participation. Of course, the quality of these child care facilities was uneven across the region and often left much to be desired; children got sick with more communicable diseases, and caregivers were often overwhelmed by the demands of too many children (problems common in day care centers today). But as with so many things in the command economy, planners allocated resources inefficiently, and demand always exceeded supply. In my research in the archives of the Bulgarian Women's Committee, for instance, I discovered many letters to the relevant ministries complaining about the lack of funds allocated for the crèches and kindergartens. Here again, the northern European countries of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland did much better. They invested state funds to build child care facilities to promote women's full employment. By the end of the Cold War, Scandinavian female labor force participation rates were second only to those of women in the Eastern Bloc.<sup>9</sup>

Upon publication of my op-ed in the *New York Times*, I received countless messages from Western readers who discussed their own frustrations. Many women who grew up in the Eastern Bloc also wrote me to relate their memories

and opinions about life under socialism, confirming with their personal anecdotes that not all was so bleak behind the Iron Curtain. My favorite letter came from a woman living in Switzerland, born into a middle-class family in Czechoslovakia in 1943. She detailed her own recollections of life under state socialism:

When I got married, we had to work to be able to pay off loans both for the flat as well as furniture we had bought. Within a year, we had our first child. The "generous" maternity leave was eight months after which I went back to work. I had to gently wake our little daughter every morning at 5:30 am as the day care center opened at 6:00 am and it took us 15 minutes by tram to get there. Once at the day care center, I had to dress her in a uniform and hurry to take the bus at 6:30 am to get to work. I often only just managed to catch the bus and it was not unusual that the doors of the bus would close behind me with part of my coat still hanging outside. At the time, my husband was getting off work at 2 pm which meant that he could pick up our daughter, buy some groceries and prepare dinner in time for my return at around 5 pm. Shortly after that, we would put our daughter to bed as the next day promised the same rushed routine as the day before. My husband and I were both tired after such a day. . . .<sup>10</sup>

The Swiss-Czechoslovak woman actually meant this description of her former life as a *criticism* of the German version of the op-ed. She felt that her life was too harried

for sex with her husband. As a working mother, I certainly understand how difficult it is to manage work/family balance, but I don't think this woman (age seventy-four when she wrote me in 2017) realized the extent of her privilege in state socialist Czechoslovakia compared to the situation of working women today. In her criticism, she mentions that she and her husband had their own private flat, she had eight months of maternity leave, their child had a spot in a state-funded day care center fifteen minutes from home, and her husband got off work at two p.m. and picked up their daughter, bought groceries, and prepared dinner before she returned home at five. She tells me that she and her husband were exhausted by this "rushed routine," but I suspect she has no idea how luxurious this routine might sound to women, even European women, trying to balance work and family today. In fact, the Cambridge Women's Pornography Cooperative publishes a book called *Porn for Women* that features men who pick up their children, buy groceries, and cook dinner before their wives get home from work.<sup>11</sup>



For many women, access to affordable and quality child care is more important than maternity leave, especially if the latter is not job-protected. When I first started out as an assistant professor, I was far removed from my family, and I placed my infant daughter in the on-campus day care center full time for five days a week. One of my colleagues had three children under the age of four—two three-year-old twin girls and a one-year-old son. This colleague, whom I

will call Leslie, had been an established professional before motherhood and had no desire to forfeit her career. She had accepted a three-quarters-time job well below her qualifications, and her husband also arranged to drop down to a four-day week. Leslie paid for the remaining three full days of child care for her three children directly through a payroll deduction. At the end of each month she would waltz into my office with her pay stub. After taxes, insurance payments, and the cost of childcare, Leslie earned about seventy cents a month. She worked thirty hours a week, and often put in unpaid extra time for evening events, for less than \$9.00 of take-home pay *per year*. And she did this for three years!

I once asked Leslie why she didn't just stay home with the kids, and she admitted that she often fantasized about it. But she refused to give up her work life, and she feared having a gap on her résumé. "I've seen too many professional women get completely derailed after taking time out of the labor force," she explained. "I'm working for nothing now, but it will pay off when my kids are old enough to go to school and I can just go out and get another full-time position."

Consider Leslie's situation compared to that of Ilse, a composite woman based on research into the experiences of a typical East German woman growing up in the 1980s. Immediately after World War II, the East Germans mobilized women into the labor force. The East German state fully supported women in the workplace, and while it encouraged marriage, being a wife was not considered a precursor to motherhood. Since there weren't enough men to go around, the state invested heavily in supporting single

mothers. In particular, the East German government idealized early motherhood and built special "mother-and-child" housing at universities where students could live with their babies. If Ilse was an average East German woman, she had her first child by the age of twenty-four, probably before she graduated from college, which meant she avoided the fertility decline associated with delayed childbearing. The government heavily subsidized housing, children's clothing, basic foods, and other expenses associated with child rearing, as well as providing women like Ilse with access to child care whenever they needed it. By 1989, out-of-wedlock births accounted for about 34 percent of all births (compared to only 10 percent in West Germany), but unlike most places in the capitalist West, single motherhood did not lead to destitution. One of my Bulgarian friends earned his degree in Leipzig in the 1990s. He recalls knowing two female students for three years before he realized that they were the mothers of small children. Nothing about motherhood interfered with their education, because their infants were cared for in campus nurseries.<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, women in Western Germany, like women in the United States, returned home to be dependent housewives and mothers after World War II, confined to the *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church). As noted earlier, West German law required a husband's consent before a woman could work outside of the home until 1957, and until 1977 family law insisted that married women were not to let their jobs interfere with their household responsibilities. On a practical level, school schedules and a lack of afterschool care rendered it almost impossible for West German women to work full time. Married mothers

worked mostly in part-time jobs with a larger gender wage gap than that found in the East.<sup>13</sup>



Of course, not all socialist countries supported women's economic independence to the extent of the East Germans (who were locked in their own Cold War rivalry with the West Germans). The Soviets relegalized abortion in 1955 but remained decidedly pro-natalist, and even the most basic sex education was absent in the public discourse. Romania and Albania were *terrible* in terms of women's reproductive freedoms, with the state forcing women to have babies by restricting access to birth control, sex education, and abortion. Although initially legal in Romania, the infamous Decree 770 of 1966 outlawed abortion in an effort to reverse the population decline, and the law was strengthened in the 1980s to include mandatory gynecological exams for women of reproductive age. The Romanian state essentially nationalized women's bodies, and many women sought dangerous, illegal abortions, as dramatized in the brilliant 2007 film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*.<sup>14</sup>

The key message here is that you do not have to have an authoritarian regime to implement policies that ease the conflict between fertility and employment. Today, almost every country in the world has some form of guaranteed paid maternity leave for women, and many are instituting parental leaves with mandatory paternity leave components. In Iceland, the most gender-equal country on the globe according to the World Economic Forum, fathers get ninety days of leave, and 90 percent of them take it. The state supports both parents to combine their work and

family responsibilities, providing the way for full gender equality in the home as well as the workplace.<sup>15</sup>

While state socialism had its downsides, the sudden change of East European women's fortunes after 1989 amply demonstrates how free markets quickly erode women's potential for economic autonomy. In Central Europe, for instance, post-1989 governments pursued conscious policies of "refamilization" to support the transition from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism. As state enterprises closed or were sold to private investors, unemployment rates skyrocketed. Too many workers competed for too few jobs. At the same time, the new democratic states reduced their public expenditures by defunding crèches and kindergartens. Public child care establishments closed, and new private facilities required substantial fees. Some governments made up for closing kindergartens by extending parental leaves for up to four years, but at far lower rates of wage compensation and without job protections.<sup>16</sup>

These policies conspired to force women back into the home. Without state-funded child care or well-paid maternity leave, and in a new economic climate where employers had a large army of the unemployed from which to choose, many women were pushed out of the labor market. From a macroeconomic perspective, this proved a boon to transitioning states. Unemployment rates dropped (and thus the need for social benefits), and women now performed for free the care work the state had once subsidized in order to promote gender equality. Later, when deeper budget cuts hit pensioners and the health care system, women already at home looking after their children could now care for the sick and the old—at great savings to the state budget.<sup>17</sup>

Given that many women preferred formal employment to the unpaid drudgery of housework, it should not be surprising that post-1989 birthrates plunged. Although birthrates in Eastern Europe were higher than those in Western Europe before 1989, they began to fall as soon as the refamilization process began. The institution of free markets actually hindered rather than helped new family formation. Nowhere was this more profound than in Eastern Germany, where skyrocketing unemployment and the collapse of support for child care contributed to an unprecedented and uncoordinated drop in fertility, what the West German press called the "birth strike." Over a five-year period, the birthrate in the East German states of reunified Germany fell by 60 percent. Although the fertility rates have climbed out of the pits of the 1990s in some countries, the former state socialist nations of Eastern Europe have some of the lowest birthrates in the world today. In 2017, Bulgaria had the fastest-shrinking population in the world, and sixteen of the top twenty nations facing the steepest expected population declines by 2030 were former state socialist nations.<sup>18</sup>

The irony is that as women were being forced back into the home in Eastern Germany, many East German women moved to the West looking for better paid jobs, and these women brought with them a set of expectations that helped West German women find their way into the workplace. The young East Germans who flooded into West Germany after 1989 were the children of working mothers, and they thought it absolutely normal that women would leave their children in kindergartens. When I lived in Freiburg, I met a West German woman who served as the managing director of a well-known academic publishing house in Stuttgart.

"Thank God for those East German women," she said, and explained that she wouldn't have had a career without them. Before 1989, West German women were expected to stay home with their children. "But when the East German women came over," she told me, "they were used to having crèches and kindergartens, and they demanded them."



Not everyone is a fan of half-hearted government-mandated paid maternity leave policies, especially those that are not enforced. Some feminists object to these policies because they fear they will disadvantage women in competitive labor markets. Employers will prefer to hire men who will not get pregnant, like my friend Jake's boss. This is why some nations have instituted take-it-or-lose-it paternity leaves to try to equalize the expectation for men's and women's care responsibilities. Sweden now requires that new mothers and fathers take a mandatory sixty days of leave each in order to qualify for the state's generous benefits. Free marketers argue that companies should be free to set their own priorities without interference from the federal government, but corporate self-regulation has had a pretty abysmal success rate. As of 2013, only an estimated 12 percent of American workers were covered by paid parental leave policies. And this is completely predictable in a free market scenario. No business wants to be known as the one with the generous maternity leave policies because it fears that the women most likely to have babies will flock to it over its competitors. But if the law requires that all companies must offer the same job-protected leave, and if the government picks up part of the tab, as in Braun's maternity insurance plan,

then many employers would be willing to support these policies. It would mean they could hire the most promising job candidates and invest in training them with a high degree of certainty that they would reap the benefits of that training. Thus, the only way to ensure that all women benefit from these policies (not just wealthier, professional women working in already enlightened companies) is to have the full weight of the federal, state, or local government behind them.<sup>19</sup>

These same employers could count on workers continuing after childbirth if high quality and reasonably priced child care were readily accessible to all parents of young children. After all, Jake's star employee did not leave after having her baby. She left, reluctantly, when the weight of an inflexible work life and a patchwork of complicated child care arrangements came crashing down on her exhausted head. The biggest help to working women would be the expansion of high-quality, federally funded child care, which would support women's ability to combine motherhood with paid employment. The United States once came close to having a nationwide child care system: the Comprehensive Child Development Act passed by a bipartisan vote of Democrats and Republicans in 1971. The act would have funded a national network of child care centers providing high-quality educational, medical, and nutritional services, a crucial first step for universal child care. President Richard Nixon vetoed the act and criticized the "family-weakening implications of the system" it envisioned. In his official veto, Nixon wrote: "For the Federal Government to plunge headlong financially into supporting child development would commit the vast moral authority of the



National Government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach." This "family-centered" approach required the unpaid labor of women in the home, reinforcing the traditional gender roles of male breadwinner and female homemaker. In essence, Nixon asked, Why should the government pay for something that we can get women to do for free?<sup>20</sup>

Although research shows that children are not harmed by quality center-based child care, and may even enjoy greater cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional development than children cared for at home, American conservatives hate the idea of child care because it also challenges male authority in the family. One op-ed contributor for Fox News sees universal child care as part of an evil plot, arguing "totalitarian governments have gone to great lengths to indoctrinate children, and the biggest obstacles they faced was parents who contradicted what the government was telling their kids." In this view, everything that state socialist countries did to support women—increasing labor force participation, liberalizing divorce laws, creating kindergartens and crèches, and supporting women's economic independence—was aimed at brainwashing children. Even public schools served the primary purpose of indoctrination.<sup>21</sup>

Women's rights and entitlements are thus painted as part of a coordinated plan to promote world communism, a threat spreading across the West. From this perspective, even democratic socialist Sweden has "aggressively instituted a very costly system of nursery school care" to "force women out of the home and into the labor force." As if Swedish women wouldn't choose to work of their own

accord. Behind the fear of government indoctrination of children is a real fear of women's economic independence and the breakdown of the traditional family.<sup>22</sup>

For now, it is still women who must gestate and deliver the actual babies (at least until scientists develop ectogenesis), but fathers can be just as involved in child care as mothers. The number of stay-at-home dads is growing, and it may be that one day employers will view male employees as potential caregivers in the same way they now view women. But until that time, competitive labor markets will continue to penalize women for their biology. The high cost of private child care—combined with the gender wage gap and social expectations that young children need mothers more than fathers—means that it is overwhelmingly still women who interrupt their work lives to stay home with small children. In the United States, these years out of the labor force hurt mothers in a variety of ways: lost income, being passed over for promotions, less money toward social security or retirement, and increased economic dependence on men. Of course some women want to stay at home, and this should remain a choice, as long as staying home to do care work does not entail financial dependence. Our goal should be that an equal number of men and women choose to act as stay-at-home parents. While this option should be open to all, I expect most men and women will not take it. With reasonable parental leaves and enough high-quality affordable child care to go around, we really can have our cake and eat it too.

One of the most obvious problems with many state socialist countries was that while citizens were guaranteed employment by the state, they were often forced to work at

jobs they didn't like. Many routine jobs were monotonous and unsatisfying (not so unlike routine jobs in the West). But too many American women who want to work are forced to stay home because of the scarcity of quality child care, the high cost when it is available, and the lack of flexibility in the labor market. Other women need to work to survive, particularly since private health insurance in the United States binds employees to their workplaces if they don't want to lose benefits. Not all women have the option of a man who can support her, and even those who do would be wise not to rely too heavily on that option. Women should not be compelled into romantic relations because it is their only chance to have a roof over their heads. Our system also places a massive burden on men, since those who cannot afford to support their spouses are shunned as romantic partners (something that is already happening in the United States, where marriage rates among the poor are at an all-time low).

At the end of the day, differences in reproductive biology make it impossible to treat men and women as equals in labor markets, where employers endeavor to hire those they guess will be their most valuable workers. This is a sticky problem that lacks simple solutions, but policies like parental leaves and state-funded universal child care help alleviate the root causes of gender discrimination. These policies started as socialist propositions and had the explicit goal of gender equity at work and at home. Over the last century, such policies have begun to work their way into the legislation of almost every country around the globe. In 2016, the United States joined New Guinea, Suriname, and some

islands in the South Pacific in being the only countries in the world lacking a national law on paid parental leave.

When I think about the woman who quit Jake's firm to stay home with her baby and my former colleague Leslie, who worked for seventy cents a month, I lament that motherhood—which should be such a source of joy—has devolved into a crushing burden for so many women. Nowhere in the developed world is it harder for ordinary people to start their families. Surely the richest countries on the planet can do better.