events in general and a Soviet women's organisation in particular. This contrasts with the 1920s and early 1930s, when the women's press reflected an active women's movement. Soviet women tend to express their grievances through the trades unions or through the opinion-forming mass media rather than directly through a women's organisation. Given the monolithic political domination of the party, it is quite inconceivable to imagine that autonomous feminism could legally flourish in the Soviet Union today. This state of affairs is common to all communist countries, including Czechoslovakia, as we shall see in the next chapter.

7 The Women's Movement in State-Socialist Czechoslovakia[1]

As we noted in Chapter 5, the Czechoslovak Communist Party had an active women's movement before the state-socialist transformation, unlike the Soviet Union, where the communist women's movement became prominent only after the October revolution. However, lacking a sufficiently strong and autonomous power-base, the Czech movement did not long survive the transformation, and the objective situation that emerged was not unlike that in the USSR – in 1952, the women's section was abolished. The establishment of socialism legitimised the abolition of separate women's organisations, and responsibilities for women's issues were assigned to trades unions in the case of employed women, and to sub-committees of 'national committees' (similar to soviets) in that of full-time housewives.

TRADES UNIONS AND WOMEN'S SUB-COMMITTEES BEFORE 1966

The trades unions. The transfer of responsibility for women's matters to the trades unions occurred slowly. The resolution of the Presidium of the Central Council of Trades Unions, which laid down the principles of trade-union activities among women, was passed only in 1957. It argued that all problems concerning employed women should be fully discussed with their direct participation. The Central Council also decided that an auxiliary body, a Women's Commission of the Works Committee,[2] with the same status as other commissions of the Works Committee, should be set up in enterprises which employed a low percentage of women. These bodies were considered unnecessary in enterprises where women were in the majority, because it was assumed that in these the trades unions were of necessity forced to deal with women's problems. However, despite these formal changes, it was another two years before specific women's demands appeared on the list of trade-union priorities – more than a decade after the communist victory and during a period in which women's employment had increased from 38 to 43 per cent.

What were the problems that the trades unions were supposed to solve for employed women? First of all, they were to create the material conditions necessary for the full realisation of the equality of women. This meant the improvement in quantity and quality of various social institutions and services and the raising of women's qualifications. However, data on day-care centres and kindergartens (presented in Chapter 16) indicate that very few trade-union branches devoted their resources to the construction of these facilities, which were mostly built by the local authorities. The task of political education that is necessary if men and women are to change their self-perceptions and prejudices was also largely ignored.[3]

As we have noted, the trades unions acknowledged women's concerns only in 1959 when the difficulties encountered by women in industry were on the agenda of the Fourth Trades Union Congress held in that year. One of the issues raised by Bedřich Kozelka, Secretary of the Central Council of Trades Unions, was that most women were unskilled or semi-skilled, while only a fraction were highly skilled. So while women received equal pay for equal work, they were not actually doing equal work and earned on average one-third less than men.[4] The solution suggested at the congress was more factory schools for raising workers' qualifications, with courses arranged at hours convenient for housewives. Unions were to 'insist' that such schools should feature in every annual collective agreement signed with the management. The trade-union bodies were also to 'insist upon' mechanisation of minor operations and organisational changes so that women would not have to lift heavy weights or stand when they could just as well sit. The unions were also 'finally' to solve the question of what to do about small children kept at home from school with minor illnesses, and thus reduce the absenteeism of employed mothers – one cause of employers' prejudice against women workers. It was suggested that local Red Cross branches seek out older women who would like occasional employment as baby-sitters (Scott, 1974: 102–3).[5]

The National Trades Union Conference in May 1965 put forward more concrete proposals for the solution of the problems of employed women. The basic problem was, and incidentally still is, that of the discrepancy between the high rate of female employment and the slow growth of household services and child-care facilities. The conference called for an extension of such services as laundries, cleaning and repair shops, and house-cleaning, together with an improvement in their quality and speed of service. It also recommended establishing shops close to enterprises employing women in large numbers and giving priority to shops carrying a wide range of foodstuffs and basic manufactured goods, both in the centre and in the outer districts of cities (Brejchová, 1967: 27–33).

As the traditional sexual division of labour, an important component of female inequality, was not challenged in these trade-union proposals (it was simply taken for granted that women do the shopping and housework, even if both spouses are engaged in full-time jobs), these recommendations certainly did not represent a complete programme for the realisation of sex equality.

The Women's Sub-Committees. Oversight of political activity among housewives was transferred from the party's women's section to women's sub-committees of national committees, established by the local authorities at all levels of the hierarchy. Modelled on the Soviet experience with delegates' meetings, it was assumed that by involving women in the activities of local authorities, they would be drawn into public administration and effective participation in social life. As housewives could be approached only in matters within their experience, namely the care of children, housekeeping and nursing, women's committees served in an advisory capacity only in those areas. The directives for the elections to the committees of women, published by the Cabinet Office in 1954, stated five main tasks and functions of the women's committees:

1. They should help employed women to solve the problems of *care of their families and children* [my italics], by demanding the establishment of day-care centres, kindergartens, children's messrooms, shops with semi-finished foodstuffs, etc., in their particular localities.
2. They should put forward able candidates for positions responsible for consumer control of the quality of food in shops and public canteens.
3. They should take a general interest in health and social services, for example, they should take care of the aged and disabled, and control hygiene in children's institutions and within their localities.
4. They should keep under review female participation in employment and help women to raise their professional qualifications.
5. They should mobilise women for various seasonal activities, such as the harvest.

It is clear that only the fourth principle is a specifically feminist demand. The first three directly reinforce the traditional sexual division of labour by accepting activities such as housework, childcare, shopping, cooking and hygiene as feminine rather than social concerns. Rather than challenging the sexist ideology which makes women responsible for their husbands' and children's well-being, the party only altered the form of this responsibility. Women were now supposed to look after their husbands and children not only within the context of the family, but also by co-operating with public institutions. For example, the traditional female housekeeping role was upheld by assigning to women the task of controlling the quality of consumer commodities. Another consequence of these activities was that they confined women only to local problems. Only the first two principles have wider societal application, yet the primary function of the women's

committees was to draw women from their narrow family circle into a wider social sphere!

Thus, after 1952, for a period of 15 years, women had no democratic representation in the political system of Czechoslovak society, because their organisation did not really exist. Women were supposed to work politically, as women, either in the trades unions or on the women's committees. The latter, however, served only in an advisory capacity to the national committees. In fact, women's committees were more under the influence and control of local authorities, at the corresponding level of the bureaucratic hierarchy, than of the hierarchical structure of their own organisation. As a result, these sub-committees were more concerned with helping local authorities to fulfil their economic assignments than with the specific problems of women.

In 1963, the women's committees attached to local authorities in towns had been dissolved, although they survived at the district and regional levels and in the farm villages and the smallest communities. Again, the reasons given were that there was no separate 'woman question' and that there were enough other organisations through which women could express themselves. A Central Committee of Czechoslovak Women (appointed by the party) also had no political existence of its own, its role being of a symbolic nature. Its main functions were to represent Czechoslovakia at international women's meetings, to play host to foreign delegations, to hold special seminars and conferences from time to time and to publish two women's magazines, *Vlasta* (in Czech) and *Slovenka* (in Slovak). Its recommendations on domestic issues were either ignored by the authorities or politely received but rarely implemented (Scott, 1974:101). For example, a government-sponsored research project on the problems of employed mothers with small children, undertaken in the early 1960s, at no stage consulted the Central Committee of Czechoslovak Women, not even after the research had been completed (Háková, 1967). Yet these issues were of direct relevance to women, and should have been of some concern to 'their' representative organisation.

THE PERIOD FROM 1966 TO 1968

In the mid-1960s, within the context of 'economic reform' and public debates on the 'effectiveness' of women's employment,[6] some women communists in the Central Committee of the Communist Party and in the trades unions began to press for a new women's organisation. In 1965, the Central Committee of Czechoslovak Women put forward a document for public discussion at the Thirteenth Party Congress proposing that a firmer organisational basis was necessary if the activity of women in economic, political and cultural life was to be intensified (Scott, 1974: 112–13). The

congress agreed to the creation of a new mass women's organisation. The resolution of the congress read:

> In accordance with the results of the pre-congress discussion, the Thirteenth Congress charges the Central Committee with the task of elaboration of suggestions for the consolidation of the organisational basis of the women's movement and enhancing the co-operative role of the Czechoslovak Committee of Women (*Vlasta*, no. 27, 6 July 1967).

It took only six months to begin the construction of a new women's organisation. Public meetings elected local and town committees of the new Czechoslovak Union of Women (hereafter CUW) during the period from November to March. The founding congress of the Slovak section of the CUW met in Bratislava on 30–31 May 1967. It discussed employment opportunities for women (which are fewer in Slovakia than in Bohemia), problems facing peasant and gypsy women and the difficulties involved in finding employment for 15-year-old girls unwilling to continue their education. The congress rejected a suggestion that mothers in low-paid jobs should stay at home and that society should either pay them directly for bringing up their children or increase their husbands' salaries (*Vlasta*, no. 24, 11 June 1967).

Then, on 5 July 1967, 656 delegates attended the national founding congress of the CUW. Helena Leflerová, Chairwoman of the former Czechoslovak Committee of Women gave the main report, in which she criticised the previous state of affairs and explained why the new women's movement had been created:

> The Czechoslovak Union of Women was created to overcome, by its activities, the hitherto fragmentary, unco-ordinated and accidental character of approaches by other institutions to the solution of women's problems, to unite these institutions in a common course of action . . . The task of the women's organisation is also to check what is happening to our proposals, and how various institutions deal with them. It is necessary to elicit from them concrete proposals which contribute to the solution of the problem (*Vlasta*, no. 29, 19 July 1967).

Although the CUW formally became autonomous (it no longer formed a section of the party, but became a regular member of the National Front, the body to which all political and social organisations are affiliated), it could not escape from the political rigidity which characterised the whole political-bureaucratic system. In other words, most political and administrative institutions did not take much notice of the new organisation. It was a radical innovation that the CUW had the right to give its opinions on issues concerning women, but in practice the party and government

organisations were not obliged to consult the Union or take much notice of its proposals and suggestions.

The newly elected Central Committee of the CUW assembled various comments and suggestions that had been expressed at the congress and forwarded them to the main political and administrative institutions. In response, several ministries at least expressed interest in seeking solutions to the social problems of women, but the commitment was in most cases insufficient and nominal. For example, the Ministry of Justice replied that certain problems could be solved by appropriate legislation, without adding that laws often become distorted and abused in their application. Protective legislation frequently achieves the opposite from what is intended because it is used against women in a discriminatory way: women are assigned work below their qualifications, with worse pay, and protective legislation is conveniently used as justification.[7] The trade-union reply, signed by the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Trades Unions, was vague and inconclusive. It did not even mention that the obligations of the trades unions towards employed women are not always fulfilled in practice. The Chairman of the National Assembly, B. Laštovička, did not even bother to answer the CUW letter (*Vlasta*, no. 21, 22 May 1968).

Thus the CUW was autonomous only formally – the leading role of the Czechoslovak Communist Party had to be uncritically and obediently accepted. The party could choose to take notice of the organisation or to ignore it. The organisational structure and the scope of activities of the women's movement were also defined by the party. For example, women could join the CUW only by virtue of their membership of local committees; individual membership was not allowed. As late as April 1968 (the 'Prague Spring' started in January 1968), the Central Committee of the CUW complained to the party and the government about the prejudiced attitudes prevailing towards women and their organisation:

> . . . we are expressing our dissatisfaction with the fact that now, as in the past, the state and the party bodies do not take into account the complex and difficult situation in which Czechoslovak women are living . . . It is no longer possible to contemplate in silence discrimination against women in the matter of financial reward, particularly in the shifts towards the lower limits of wage categories and in the current tax system. The condition of women is further aggravated by the low standard of services and trade. Only a few women occupy leading positions, even in such obviously feminised sectors as the educational system, health service, textile and food industries, from factories to ministries . . . (*Vlasta*, no. 17, 24 April 1968).

THE PRAGUE SPRING

On 10–11 April 1968, at the plenary session of the Central Committee of the CUW, the old leadership resigned. Some women, who had worked in the women's movement before the war and who had not been allowed to do so after 1948, were co-opted to the Central Committee. Then, at the plenary session of the Central Committee, held on 26–27 June 1968, the *Action Programme of the Women's Movement* was adopted. It had seven sections:

1. Women in the public and political life
2. Women and the family
3. Position of employed women
4. Women in agriculture
5. Development of the woman's personality
6. Women for peace and international co-operation
7. The mission and construction of the Czechoslovak Union of Women.

The last section is of particular importance to the present discussion. The CUW saw itself as an independent organisation, as a pressure group within a pluralist political system, and as an equivalent to political parties and other social organisations. Feminist consciousness was considered to be the most important issue and the chief concern of the organisation: indeed, the CUW thought that feminist issues should be its exclusive responsibility. The action programme stated explicitly:

> Through the medium of its organisation, women must have a direct influence on state policy, its formation and realisation. [The CUW] puts forward proposals to parliament, government and other accountable organs from the central to the local ones, and demands their realisation. It participates in the formation of laws connected with the position and problems of women, families and children. And the condition for the Czechoslovak Union of Women to carry such weight in our political system is the fostering of voluntary membership and activities by the largest possible number of women of all ages, professions, positions and opinions.[8]

The action programme was widely accepted and membership of the CUW began to grow. The principle of collective membership previously forced upon the CUW by the party, was abolished in June 1968. By January 1969, the organisation had 300,000 individual members, almost double the total of the previous year. Feminist institutions such as CUW clubs, which were social centres for women, were also in their formative stages. The Soviet invasion in August 1968 did not put an immediate end

to these activities, as the organisation continued for another year. The Chairwoman of the Czech Union of Women[9] could claim as late as May 1969:

> The Czechoslovak Union of Women became the equal partner of other members of the National Front. Following on from the former formal organisation, the Czechoslovak Union of Women became an independent organisation, equivalent to political parties and other social organisations . . . In practical terms, it intends to express openly women's demands, exploiting individual approaches and arguments to the full, to put forward proposals, to demand that the National Front discuss the legitimate demands of women, and to insist on their fulfilment.[10]

However, by September 1969, any suggestions of political pluralism or independent feminism were denounced as 'reactionary' or 'counter-revolutionary'.

THE CUW AND THE TRADES UNIONS AFTER 1969

The CUW. In September 1969, the leadership of the CUW was forced collectively to resign and the movement was brought back under the complete control of the party. As an internal discussion document of the secretariat of the present-day CUW indicates,[11] the leading role of the Communist Party is the guiding principle for women's activities in Czechoslovakia today:

> The Czechoslovak Union of Women enlists the support of its members and other women for the policy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia . . . It develops mass-based, politico-educational and organisational work among women in the spirit of resolutions of the congresses of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia . . . The Czechoslovak Union of Women participates in the management and administration of the state, co-operates with state bodies, above all local authorities, and takes the initiative in submitting proposals for the solution of questions concerning the position of women under socialism. It helps to train women for active participation in public life and proposes the best of them for election to representative bodies and to other functions.

Thus, while the organisation has some autonomy and scope for intiative, in the final analysis its overall political status is subordinate.

The party now determines the orientation of the women's movement rather than women themselves. For example, at the moment the chief

concern of the party is with population policy; therefore, the women's movement is also preoccupied with that issue. A government resolution of 1 September 1971, about the solution of the population problem, specifically urged the CUW to 'orient its activity to the systematic education of young women for parenthood' (*Děti, naše budoucnost*, 1972: 50). The CUW readily complied with that resolution. The discussion document mentioned above includes a whole section devoted to the 'enhancement of the social significance of motherhood'. The pamphlet emphasises that the CUW will support the pro-natalist policy of the government, popularise the ideal of a multi-membered socialist family and educate women towards conscious motherhood. Thus, the traditional female child-bearing and socialising function within the family is now uncritically reinforced by women's own organisation!

The failure to challenge the existing division of labour within the family and in society is also evident elsewhere in the document. The CUW does not challenge and does not seek to alter the existing female responsibility for housework; it only seeks to ease its burden. The CUW attempts to 'help women to extend their leisure by organising special-interest activities; to teach them to use all types of labour-saving services and facilities and how to organise housework more easily and rationally.' There is not even a suggestion that housework should be the equal responsibility of both spouses.

This sort of attitude has also found its expression in some of the activities of the Czechoslovak youth organisation. In 1969, Young Pioneer Houses at district and regional levels founded the first so-called 'Girl's Clubs'. These clubs provide facilities for those girls attending elementary schools

> who have realised the importance and true meaning of the old Czech saying that 'love passes through the stomach', preferably full stomach, we might add . . . the clubs enable young girls to learn to cook well and quickly, shop economically, and to know their way around the stores. Also to sew, embroider and make lace . . . the clubs turn out modern, able and prudent housewives who will retain their typically female qualities and talents even though they will actively participate in the building of our socialist homeland (Štětinová, 1974).

One must add that the author wrote the article for a propaganda journal intended for readership abroad, which might account for some of its conservative and un-Marxist leanings, but the reactionary character of these views is nonetheless quite startling. Neither the author, nor the clubs themselves, advance the goals of good and fast cooking, economical shopping and rational housekeeping as in any sense applicable to boys!

Thus, the most publicised activities of the women's and youth organisations occur in the traditional female domain – the family. The Slovak Union of Women has taken the task of educating young people for

marriage and parenthood very seriously and has worked out a project called the 'Little Family School'. The project is in two parts: theoretical and practical. The theoretical part consists of ten lectures, seminars and discussions, with films and slides, covering such topics as: the drive for a better life for women and children, spearheaded by the party; the position of women in socialist society; knowledge of oneself as a woman, and of the opposite sex; the care of the mother and the child by the socialist health service; the physical and mental development of the child in the first year of its life; infectious diseases and the struggle against them; the position of women in the family and in society; inter-human relationships, friendship and love, woman and marriage; woman as mother-educator. The practical part consists of courses in cooking, knitting and household management (Hinnerová, 1973: 27–8). During the academic year 1971/72, forty-two such 'Little Family Schools' were held throughout Slovakia, with an average participation of 25–30 young people. The main Slovak women's magazine, *Slovenka*, has a regular column under the same title and thus helps to popularise the whole project. While local committees have some autonomy in working out their particular projects, it is clear that the Slovak Union of Women is promoting the strengthening of the family.

Thus far, the project has been heavily biased towards women and the traditional sexual division of labour, but, as distinct from their policy on girls' clubs, the Central Committee of the Slovak Union of Women has suggested that similar schools should also be arranged for boys and young men. It has also emphasised that the theoretical part of the project should be more important than the practical part. As quite a few topics of the theoretical part cover interpersonal relationships, an area which has been neglected by socialist theory and practice, the 'Little Family Schools' project can be regarded in this sense as a step forward.

These developments should not lead us to the conclusion that the Communist Party and the CUW are advocating some kind of 'feminine mystique'. What has happened is a change in emphasis and priority rather than a fundamental reorientation of policy. Although the women's organisation has taken various measures over the last few years to make maternity more attractive to women, it has not ignored women's productive roles in the economy. The different bodies of the CUW have special commissions not only for the family and education for parenthood, but also for political education and employed women in industry, agriculture and public services.

The commissions for political education concentrate mainly on political and cultural work among women. They arrange meetings to discuss important current issues, give lectures, hold debates, seminars, etc. The agricultural commissions help to raise the cultural level of women's life and work in the villages and to improve qualifications. For example, the commissions organise excursions to particularly successful agricultural co-operatives (there is no private agriculture in Czechoslovakia) to promote

exchanges of experience, arrange discussion evenings and meetings of women doing different jobs in agriculture, and assist in improving the range of products supplied to village shops. The commissions for employed women give their attention to places where the majority of workers are women and check whether the legal regulations issued in the interest of women are consistently observed. However, as in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, the political activities of employed women are concentrated in the trades unions rather than in the women's organisation.

The trades unions. In April 1974, 3,652 women's commissions with a total membership of 18,000 existed within trade-union organisations at the local and district levels. Of these committees, 2,594 were at local branch level (Růžičková, 1974). Their specific tasks were defined as follows:

1. Politico-educational work – foundation of collectivities competing for the title of socialist work, deepening of relations of comradely co-operation, mutual support and help at the place of work, enlisting women for higher participation in public and political life.
2. Improvement of hygiene and working conditions and of the standard of care of working women by employing enterprises.
3. Persuading women to use works or office canteens (because women frequently refuse cooked meals on the grounds that they have them later at home after finishing work).
4. In co-operation with other commissions, to check that enterprises make full use of women's qualifications and the principles of the existing wage policy in rewarding women, including provisions for various forms of further education.
5. To assist other committees responsible for children and workers' recreation.
6. To check the distribution and capacity of day-care centres and kindergartens, with regard to present as well as future needs, and to exert pressure on their enterprises to establish day-care centres and kindergartens either by themselves or in conjunction with other enterprises.

We can see that these activities are extensive and beneficial to women, but also rather localised and non-political. Women's commissions and other women officials of the trades unions can be credited with the establishment of women's rest corners in various enterprises, the introduction of refrigerators and buffets selling beverages at places of work, the installation of adequate air-conditioning, the provision of cloakrooms and showers, as well as hairdressing and pedicure centres, the provision of electric massage equipment for women, etc. – all politically non-controversial matters. Women's commissions in many cases have also been responsible for the introduction of such services as the dispatch of clothes

for dry-cleaning and laundering (*Working Women in Czechoslovakia*, 1975: 75–6).

Marie Růžičková, the Secretary of the Czech Trades Union Council and one of the most highly placed women within the trade-union hierarchy, concludes an article (1974) on working women and the trades unions with the following words:

> The solution of the problems faced by working women is the task of the whole of society. They cannot be solved in isolation from the overall problems of our socialist construction. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that the problems of women will be solved automatically with the development of socialist society. They also cannot be a matter for women alone – the whole of society must pay attention to them, but they cannot be solved without women.

What Růžičková does not mention is how the 'overall problems of our socialist construction' can be solved within the existing repressive party-state framework. No opposition political parties are allowed in the communist countries and labour unions only rarely involve themselves in autonomous politics. Their primary concern is with day-to-day welfare issues and the mobilisation of workers behind the official policy to stimulate higher productivity and ensure fulfilment of the production plan. The women's organisations are expected to play a similar role. As in other state-socialist societies, the Communist Party retains a monopoly of power and doctrine, and a potentially autonomous political force would be regarded as a threat to this monopoly. An independent feminist movement of the current Western type therefore cannot legally emerge in the communist countries to campaign against male domination or for fundamental changes in the sexual division of labour.