

I Would Take any Job, but...: Biographies of Low-Educated Women at the Intersection of Class and Gender¹

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I Would Take any Job, but...: Biographies of Low-Educated Women at the Intersection of Class and Gender. The paper analyses the biographies of women at the intersection of class and gender in the Czech Republic. With the transition towards a market-based economy and a decrease in the symbolic capital of workers in the blue-collar and service fields, and in the context of a familialist social policy and a labour market that discourages a combination of paid employment and care responsibilities, women with low education find themselves in the secondary labour market and exposed to gender discrimination. We illustrate how an intersectional approach (Brah – Phoenix 2004) can be used in sociology to analyze the ways in which class, gender and other social categories, such as care responsibility, interact and mutually constitute each other in the lives of women.
Sociológia 2012, Vol. 44 (No. 6: 651-677)

Key words: gender; class; care; intersectionality; transition period; Czech Republic.

I. Introduction

Education levels are a crucial factor in the position of women in the labour market. Links between poor education and job insecurity, income disadvantage and social exclusion have been well-documented. (e.g. Fagan – Rubery 1996; Esping-Andersen 2009) The risk of exposure to poverty is known to rise with declining education (Esping-Andersen 2009) and higher education represents an exit strategy from poverty. (Mihaylova 2004) In the highly gender-segregated Czech labour market (Křížková – Sloboda 2009), with de facto institutionalised gender-discriminatory practices (Křížková – Penner – Petersen 2010), a higher level of education is a significant competitive edge for women, especially in comparison and in competition with other women. (Čermáková 1997; Šmídová 2008) During transition from state-socialism in the early 1990s the significance of education changed as Czech society shifted from a centrally planned system focused on heavy industry that privileged manual workers³ to a

¹ This article was written as part of the research project 'Changes in partnership and family forms and arrangements from the life course perspective' (grant no. P404/10/0021), funded by the Czech Science Foundation and with the support of long-term strategic development of research organization RVO: 68378025. Both authors work at the Institute of Sociology AS CR, v.v.i. We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

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³ However, Czech women's education level has increased since the beginning of their mass introduction to the labour market in the 1950s. Nevertheless, in 1980, 79% of Czech and Slovak women had low education (no education, elementary school, or secondary school without a school-leaving exam) and only 3% of women had a university education (*Historical Statistical Yearbook of Czechoslovakia 1948 – 1983*).

market based economy in which inequalities are significantly constructed along the lines of education, competence and experience. (Vecernik 2001)

This paper discusses socio-historical and biographical perspectives on women's working lives during a period of dynamic change and ongoing transitions in the Czech Republic. In our research, we aimed to answer the question: How have women with low education coped, in their employment strategies, with inequality, growing insecurity and social risks in Czech society? For the purposes of this text, low education is defined as an elementary school education or vocational training as the highest level of education achieved⁴. We use a biographical research method to analyse structural and institutional conditions as well as social and cultural processes in interaction with various individual transitions (marriage, divorce, motherhood and periods of care, etc.) which all influence the employment trajectories of women.

We employ an intersectional approach, which enables us to analyse gender and class in their mutual interaction in historically specific contexts. (Brah – Phoenix 2004) We focus on a single group of women – women with low education – from within a larger study of Czech women's work trajectories. (Křížková et al. 2011)⁵ This allows us to analyze the complexity of the social position of this specific group of women at the intersection of multiple categories, such as gender (being a woman) and class (having low education). (McCall 2005: 1783) We also use the concept of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986) which allows “the possibility of discovering how informants have maintained and constructed their biographical identities” especially in historical moments of crisis or transition. (Humphrey – Miller – Zdravomyslova 2003: 4) According to the theory of social capital “[T]he disadvantaged – whether they are distinguished by gender, ethnicity, race, disability or anything else – by definition have, in sum, less access to economic, cultural and social capital”. (Ibid: 11) The theory of intersectionality adds a new dimension here because it shows how a person can be disadvantaged in some respect (for example, woman) and privileged in another (for example, white) and these dimensions combine, influence and reproduce each other. The combination of these two theoretical approaches allows us to analyze the process of (re)construction of the biographical identity of low educated women in this historical context.

⁴ In the ISCED system we include levels 0 – 2 (up to primary education) and 3C (secondary education without graduation).

⁵ Biographies of women with low education were collected as part of a larger project focused on working paths of women in the Czech Republic ‘Processes and Sources of Gender Inequalities in Women's Careers in Connection with the Transformation of Czech Society after 1989 and with the EU Membership of the Czech Republic’ (grant no. IAA700280804), funded by the Grant Agency of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. More results of this project can be found in the monograph authored by Alena Křížková, Hana Maříková, Hana Hašková and Lenka Formánková (2011). For a detailed description of the larger sample of 58 biographies, see note 10.

An analysis of the biographical accounts of two women, Dana and Eva⁶, is presented. Dana, a 44-year-old mother of three, spent over half her life under the state-socialist regime in one of the most historically important industrial locations of the Czech Republic⁷. Originally well-placed in the labour market as a blue-collar worker, her biography changed over the course of time with the Czech socio-economic transformation. Eva aged 38, is childless and a trained waitress. After being an employee, she opened her own business. Despite her childlessness she is affected by discrimination – against motherhood and by gender – and had to deal with the difficulties of combining work and care (for a parent) in the Czech labour market. These two stories represent the lived experiences of the “losers” in the post-socialist transformation process: two women, originally with good prospects for a working career, finding themselves in vulnerable positions with limited choices. The presentation of the analysis as two narratives representing the whole sample allows us not only to point to the difference among women but also to focus on the changing intersection of the disadvantages and resources of these women during their life cycle and in their life story.

II. Theoretical approach

Intersectionality is a theoretical and methodological approach applied to the study of inequalities, which has not yet been widely developed in Czech or Slovak sociology. (Kolářová 2008) It strives to capture, both theoretically and empirically, the complex relationships between various forms of social inequality, and thus to achieve a theoretical shift away from an approach known to focus on multiple disadvantage – in which sources of inequality (e.g., class, education, economic status, race, ethnicity or gender) are analytically layered as mutually independent – to a “multiplication” approach. (Choo – Ferree 2010: 131) It is not enough to add or ascribe sources of inequality one to another (double or triple disadvantage), because these sources can often, at least partially, mutually constitute or reinforce each other. (Crenshaw 1991; Brah – Phoenix 2004; McCall 2005; Walby 2007, Shields 2008) This means that it is only in relation to another category that categories of identity, in a dynamic process, take their meaning. (Shields 2008)

Groups and individuals may not always be disadvantaged on all axes as dis/advantage is constituted by the intersection of individual axes. In any particular context or power relationship, certain characteristics can be a source of disadvantage or advantage; therefore, it is inaccurate to talk about definitively marginalized groups (e.g., Roma or women). Rather the analysis must

⁶ All names are pseudonyms in order to protect privacy.

⁷ For reasons of confidentiality, we have left all regions and cities unnamed.

always be embedded in a comparative framework or a concrete context created by multidimensional hierarchies. (Walby 2007) Intersectionality brings benefits for sociology as a whole because it sees axes of disadvantage not separately but always in relationship to privileging characteristics. It thus does not only deal with marginalized groups. For example, race should not be analysed solely as having significance for black lives, as if whiteness is not racial and has no meaning in the lives of white people. (Choo – Ferree 2010: 141)

In principle there are two variants of intersectionality: 1) static, or category focused, where the core element is comparative analysis above the individual level (McCall 2005) and 2) dynamic, or process and relation focused, which focuses primary attention on context and comparison at intersections and reveals structural processes of organizing power. (Choo – Ferree 2010: 133-134) For our research encompassing the historical transition from socialism to capitalism in the Czech Republic, we employ the dynamic approach to study changing inequality structures as contextual locations of the biographies analysed. We use the concepts of cultural capital – in one of its specific forms, educational attainment – and social capital – as networks of relationships and connections – as forms of capital that can be used to accumulate other types of capital, especially economic and symbolic capital. (Bourdieu 1986: 51) During and after the transition, the rules governing how to maximise the various types of capital changed suddenly, the dispositions of habitus no longer operated in the same way, and applications of the rules consequently altered. (Humphrey – Miller – Zdravomyslova 2003: 12) The concepts of capital, habitus and field fit well with the requirement of the dynamic intersectionality perspective to maintain focus on the social location or context of the intersection of inequalities. Social location in this case is represented by the historical changes connected to transition in the Czech Republic.

The findings in this article fill a gap in studies of the intersection of gender and class inequalities in Central and Eastern European countries with its specific historical development of class and gender relations. We show how women adapted in the period of changes in the relations of production towards a market-based, capitalist society which saw the dismantling of relative working class privilege. (Matějů 1996)

III. Structural factors in historical perspective

Despite proclamations of equality and women's emancipation, the system of full employment⁸, which was maintained and enforced under the pre-1989 state

⁸ In socialist Czechoslovakia employment was mandatory and thus officially there was no unemployment. From 1962 to 1989 it was a criminal offence not to work. This labour market model involved a high level of job security and low labour productivity.

socialist regime and featured centrally controlled wages, was characterised by significant gender inequalities in practice. (Fodor 2002; Křížková – Vohlídalová 2009) Unequal conditions resulted from the double burden of paid and unpaid work that women carried; women were viewed primarily as mothers and caretakers, even though two incomes were necessary for a household to maintain an average standard of living. The state socialist project of widely available household services and “emancipated households” was never realised in practice. (Havelková 1999) Contrary to expectations, post-1989 Czech women did not leave the labour market in large numbers to become housewives; rather, throughout the transition period and further, Czech women represented almost half of the labour force. (Čermáková 1997) It is also relatively rare for women in the Czech Republic to be employed part-time⁹.

With the transition from a centrally-planned to a market-based economy during the 1990s, the reduction of social policy expenditure, growing insecurity, flexibility in the labour market and emerging social inequalities resulted in new social risks. (Sirovátka – Mareš 2006; Sirovátka 2006) The main characteristics of the changes were a sharp decline in GDP per capita and consequently a sharp decline in labour market participation and the emergence of unemployment. (Kotýnková 2006) In formerly socialist countries, labour-market reforms and the widening of wage differences according to education level had a disproportionately negative impact on women. (Brainerd 2000: 138) In the Czech Republic after 1992, wages were liberalised and the real wages of mining and manual workers, privileged under the state socialist regime, dropped in this period. (Rutkowski 2001) Public services saw an uneven rise in earnings with some services advancing (e.g., finance, public administration, justice) while others, especially the “feminised” branches of employment, lagged behind (e.g., health and social services, education and research). (Večerník 2001: 13) In the newly formed capitalist labour market, women are under-represented in the “primary labour market” with its higher prestige, good conditions and good wages while they are over-represented in the “secondary labour market” which has poor conditions, low prestige and low wages. (Anker 1998: 23) Additionally, the shift towards the “Western model” of individual wage setting has been more rapid in the male-dominated niches of the labour market. The gender wage gap is high and significant even when men and women are doing the same work for the same employer. (Křížková – Penner – Petersen 2010) Workers and women have been widely recognized as two groups of losers in the post-socialist transition process. (Matějů 1996; Pollert 2005)

⁹ Only about 8% of women (and about 2% of men) work part-time in the Czech Republic, compared to more than one third of women in Western European societies (i.e., Germany, Netherlands, and the UK).

The drastic cuts in social benefits and family support services connected with the 1990s transformation (Keller 2005) and with the 2008 global economic crisis had highly gendered consequences. Czech families with children have become the households with the highest income disadvantage. (Sirovátka – Mareš 2006) This socio-economic transformation undermined access to adequately paid and sustainable jobs for women with children, which led to an increase in long-term unemployment, social exclusion and poverty in this group. (Sirovátka 2006; Esping-Andersen et al. 2002; Taylor-Gooby 2004) The changes in family and employment policies resulted in a severe lack of childcare facilities for children under three and even for pre-school-age children. In combination with the incentives of the new employment policy for women and older workers to leave the labour market (True 2003; Víšek 2006), for example, the extension of parental leave to three years, the Czech Republic has turned to a regime of explicit familialism. (Heitlinger 1993; Leitner 2003; Crompton – Lyonette 2005; Saxonberg – Sirovátka 2007) Family policy in the Czech Republic supports the ideal of full-time maternal care (Kremer 2007; Formánková – Dobrotić 2011), leaving women with small children (and especially groups of low-educated women) in lasting employment inactivity¹⁰. As a result, parenthood in the Czech Republic has a larger impact on women's employment levels than in other EU countries¹¹.

It is however not only the policy design which influences the working life of women, but also the ideology of separate and complementary spheres of male and female activity, which is deeply rooted in everyday decisions, and becomes concrete in the gendered division of labour. (Crompton – Harris 1998; Treas – Widmer 2000)

IV. The biographical research method

Biographical research (or life story research) focuses on subjectivity in the context of individual and societal history. (Bertaux 2003; Chamberlayne 2004; Sabelis et al. 2008) Life stories include not only events and experiences but also associated perceptions and mental representations. (Potančoková 2005: 2)

Humphrey – Miller – Zdravomyslova (2003: 4) suggest biographical methods for research on the transition from socialism to post-socialism because when people recount the significant points in their lives, one can often note a striking juxtaposition of the personal and the public in the restructuring of identity

¹⁰ The system of parental leave is rather complicated in the Czech Republic. The leave itself lasts a maximum of three years, however a parental benefit can be provided until the child is 4 years old. Another major barrier to the return to the labour market is provided by the limited access to pre-school facilities, which are virtually non-existent for children aged under 3, and their availability is drastically declining for children aged 3 to 6. Also access to alternative organisation of work such as part-time or flexi-time is still scarce.

¹¹ The difference in the employment rates of women 20–50 years old with and without children under 6 years of age for the Czech Republic was 40 percentage points in 2009 (see *Indicators for Monitoring the Employment Guidelines 2010*).

which can also be called biographical work. The biographic method was successfully used by Potančoková in research on changes in reproductive behaviour in communist and post-communist Slovakia. (Potančoková 2009)

Sylvia Walby (1991) argues that, on the micro level, the biographical approach connects life events, periods and turning points and, on the macro level, it connects experience, interpretation of and reflection on opportunities and barriers. Therefore such a perspective suits our analysis of individual strategies for coping with social risks within the context of a working career, shaped by economic, health, social and other insecurities. (Rustin – Chamberlayne 2002)

Biographical research methodology belongs to the interpretative research approach, which has been developing in sociology since the 1920s. (Rosenthal 2004: 48) It has influenced ethno-methodological research (Merrill – West 2009), oral history (Ritchie 1995) and psychological approaches (narrative research). These approaches share recognition of the importance of subjective accounts of the researched phenomena. By giving voice to marginalized groups, these approaches legitimate everyday experiences which are not part of the dominant historical and social discourses. (Thompson 2000) Mills (2002: 12) describes biography as a unique intersection of history, social structures and individual agency. The approach enables the researcher to capture personal transitions in the context of the whole lived experience and at the same time understand the impact of societal change on individual life paths. (Rustin – Chamberlayne 2002: 2)

Biographical and autobiographical methods have also been an integral part of feminist epistemology for the last several decades. (Oakley 1981; Harding 1986) They are directly linked with the basic ideological approaches of the women's movement. (Reinharz 1992: 126) When focused on the specific experiences of women, these methods help to revise the dominant notion of history built on male experience and enable both researchers and readers to identify with the participants. (Merrill – West 2009: 29-30)

Using the biographical method for case studies of women with low education in post-socialist Czech society enables us to give voice to women with a specific experience of oppression¹². Based on a theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser – Strauss 1967), we selected the two cases according to central factors having a negative impact on the employability of women in the Czech labour market: low education, age, children under seven years of age, and experience with precarious employment. These factors were identified in the

¹² Between May and September 2009, a team of four female researchers conducted 58 interviews. Participants included 10 childless women aged 35-44, 11 women older than 55, and 37 women with children, with the condition that the youngest child was under seven. Out of the 58, 15 had elementary or lower secondary education, 19 had full secondary education and 24, university education.

analysis of the whole sample of 58 biographies of Czech women with different level of education, age and family status. (Křížková et al. 2011) The two cases were chosen from a sample of 15 low-educated women among our 58 interviews as illustrative of diverse realisations of life and employment trajectories at the intersection of class and gender. Also, several mechanisms of marginalisation are captured in the chosen biographies of Eva and Dana. This allowed us to illustrate the processes which were also found in the rest of the sample of low educated women on these two cases and to show their biographies as wholes in a context of institutional settings and personal and family situations and relationships.

In the construction of the wider sample of 58 interviews, we focused on the diversity of the sample using the snowball technique. We were looking for women in all education categories, mothers and childless women, women with work experience during socialism and/or post-socialism. We used Witzel's (2000) technique of problem-oriented interview to collect the women's work biographies. Witzel suggests flexibility in the choice of interview format and a focus on the progression of the interview to maintain an environment of trust and respect, as the goal is to establish the most natural everyday dialogue. (Witzel 2000) Following Witzel's technique, we collected, at the start of each interview, the basic demographic characteristics of each woman and followed with an introductory question, in order to initiate the narration¹³.

All the interviews were collected and analysed personally by the four female members of the research team including the writers of this paper. We were aware that we could not control the effects of our personal characteristics or of the research interview situation on the data we collected. Wide social differences between us and interviewees were often obvious – in our marital status, family situation (three of us were childless), level of education, socio-economic status, etc. Despite these differences we endeavoured to establish an environment of trust and respect. We gave the women the right to choose the time and place of the interview (either in their homes, workplace or a café) and always answered their questions about our own biographies (for example, whether we had children, our family plans or family situation). On one hand the revealed differences might have had (and most likely had) an impact on the stories we received; our interviewees might have felt the need to explain some

¹³ At the beginning of the contact, we provided the interviewees with information about the general idea of the research, with a letter describing the research project and its purpose, and our contact details. Then we explained the need to record and transcribe the interviews and the ethical way we handle the data (anonymous use, pseudonyms and locked storage of any personal information). At the beginning of the interview, we collected and recorded an oral consent for the interview and the recording. The following questions opened the interview: 1. Could you please tell me how old you are, whether you have children, how old they are and your education level? 2. Could you please tell me how your life has developed since you finished your education?

events and motivations in more detail or differently according to these differences. On the other hand, these differences can be used in the analysis. For example, our own experience as women with high levels of education can serve as a comparison with the experience of women with low education. Each interview lasted two to three hours and the transcriptions of the recordings and our own field notes serve as the basis for our analysis.

In the analysis of the data, we apply Rosenthal's (2004) biographical case reconstruction. Combining several methods of qualitative data analysis, the method starts with an analysis of the formal biographical data and of the structure of the self-presentation. Valery Golofast (2003: 58-63) defines three main dimensions of the biographical narrative. The first dimension is the everyday routine on personal, family and societal levels. The second dimension is life as a sequence of events. The third dimension expresses hidden aspects of the narrator's life, such as psychological and personal problems, histories of oppression, humiliation and so on. Like Golofast (2003), we identified, from the rich interview material, three key components of the narrations. Firstly, by focusing on the subjectively experienced turning points in the personal histories of the narrators, we were able to reconstruct the work paths as sequences of historical events. Secondly, we identified culturally shared gender norms and values reflected and/or reproduced in the narrations. Thirdly, we focused on how the intersections of personal characteristics, intimate life and structural and institutional factors influenced the work trajectories of low-skilled women.

To sum up, we focus not only on the sequences of lived experience, but also on how the lived life is presented as a story. In this way, it is possible for us to identify more general patterns; for example, how people interpret specific phenomenon in the context of their general life experience.

V. Dana

Dana was born in 1964 in a small town in a historically important industrial region of the Czech Republic. During the socialist period (between 1948 and 1989), besides agriculture, heavy industry was the most valued type of production. It was seen as a symbol of prosperity¹⁴. Since the 1989 Velvet Revolution ended Communist state socialism, the western part of the Czech Republic, where Dana lives, has undergone a huge transformation, resulting in production changes in processing sectors (automobile and electrical engineering). During late 2008 and 2009, the region was heavily affected by the global economic crisis, also reflected in a distinct dampening of industrial production and mass layoffs. (Foldynová – Ivan – Tvrđý 2009) As the result, at

¹⁴ The industry focused mostly on black coal mining, heavy machinery and metallurgy; because of the suppression of mining from the beginning of the 1990s, the unemployment rate in the region grew rapidly.

the time of the interview, the region was struggling with 13% unemployment, which was well above the national average of 8%. (Dušánková et al. 2010)

In 1981, when she was 17, Dana finished her vocational training to be milliner and started working in a millinery plant affiliated with the school she had attended. In the Czech Republic of the 1980s, the majority of the adult population had at most a lower secondary education (vocational training), so at the time she started her working life, in terms of cultural capital, Dana had relatively good prospects in the labour market. (Foldynová – Ivan – Tvrđý 2009) Her choice of training was not based on her specific interests, but had been suggested to her by a friend who had studied the same field and was satisfied with the conditions in the company. At the age of 20, in 1984, Dana married a work colleague. Marriage and parenthood in the late teens or early twenties were expected stages of adult life in communist Czechoslovakia. This was a result of, firstly, social and cultural limitations on alternatives (travelling, careers, further study), secondly, a system of controlled job allocation and housing policy, and finally, family policy measures for families with small children. (Hašková – Maříková – Uhde 2009)

In 1987, four years after her marriage, Dana gave birth to her first child, a son. After a year on maternity leave, she went back to work. At that time, this was the maximum length of the leave she could take. Due to the pro-natal orientation of family policy, the mother was entitled to extended maternity leave until the child reached three years of age only if there were two or more children under the age of three¹⁵. The widespread availability of childcare institutions – often as in Dana's case, run by her employer – allowed her to return to work:

Well, it was different at that time. So, I wanted to work, I wanted to get back. I knew I would have to go to work one day anyway, so that is about the way it was. There was a nursery, established directly by the company, so I returned after one year.

Dana's biographical account shows that the high availability of pre-school facilities before 1989 had a positive impact on women's early return to the labour market. Between 1980 and 1989, nurseries were attended by 21% of children aged below one. (Hašková – Maříková – Uhde 2009) After 1989, the number of nurseries for children under three was reduced by 95% (Kuchařová 2010), which made pre-school institutions for children under three practically unavailable for most families. Since Dana and her then-husband worked shifts,

¹⁵ While in the 1960s, mothers stayed at home with their first child for the shortest period of time in the entire socialist era, in the 1970s this period was gradually prolonged to reach the limit of three years generally applied in the 1980s. (Hašková 2010: 12)

they took turns taking their child to and from the nursery, depending on who was on the morning shift and who worked afternoons. Also the average length of leave was shorter (55% of women returned to work before the child was two in the 1980s, whereas, during the 1990s, the number dropped to 22%), which helped re-integrate mothers into the labour market. (Hašková 2010)

Two years later, when her son was three years old, Dana decided to change profession. It was 1991, at the beginning of the socio-economic transformation process. Her reason was her fear of factory restructuring, accompanied by massive layoffs. Dana flexibly adapted her cultural capital to the changes in the field. She started working as a nurse in a retirement home and, at the same time, undertook training for medical nurses organized by the local employment bureau. She said she was fond of the new job mainly for a practical reason. She had very agreeable working hours, as she was at work only until the early afternoon, so she could easily combine work and care for her pre-school son. She used her social capital to gain the job through her mother-in-law who was already employed there.

Two years later, in 1993, Dana took maternity leave to care for her newborn daughter. As her husband had started a private business and she became fully in charge of the children and household, she wanted to stay at home as long as she was eligible for the parental benefit. However, she did not want to stay out of the labour market for the whole period of leave, so she took a part-time job as a cleaner for her former employer. While Dana was on parental leave with her daughter, a change in family policy legislation postponed the right to parental benefits until the child was four years old¹⁶ while parental leave remained until the child was three. The parental benefit was no longer linked to employment protection. At the same time, Dana was able to work while receiving the parental benefit under the condition that she did not use the public childcare institutions. A return to the previous employer and previous type of work was only guaranteed within the framework of parental leave which lasted until the child was three, a condition of which Dana was not aware:

So I... I liked it that way, with only the part-time job (...). And I saw that he [her husband] had more money and was not at home so much and that our life changed so much. So, when he's not at home, you are mostly alone for everything, right? When he knew that I was at home, he remained at work longer (...). At that time the legislative change took place, so there was this switch from three to four years of the parental leave. And I, being unaware of the legal act, thinking they would take me back afterward; I remained at home

¹⁶ Act No. 117/1995 Coll., on State Social Support, Prague: PČR.

for four years. But they sent me a notice of termination. When my daughter was three, I was fired.

This part of Dana's story illustrates how the low cultural capital of women with low education provides barriers to being able to navigate through the extremely complex and constantly changing system of family policy in the Czech Republic. As in Dana's case, this may lead to unfavorable decisions with significant negative impacts on further work.

In her narrative, Dana also points out a gender contract: when a woman is the primary caregiver, the man as the main breadwinner can spend more time at work, and therefore the woman is pushed to stay at home or at least to alter her work hours in accordance with her caring duties. (Crompton – Harris 1998) This traditional division of work is typical among couples in which the women have low education; exchange of roles within these couples is considered rather unacceptable. (Tomešová-Bartáková 2010: 206)

The negative influence of a long period of inactivity on women's employability has been proven by extensive research as well as the inefficiency of a long parental leave period on the employment protection of women's jobs. (Gornick – Meyers 2003; Anxo et al. 2007; Yerkes 2010; Křížková – Vohlídalová 2009) Dana's story illustrates how legislative changes in the family policy system in the Czech Republic – prolonging parental leave and benefits and closing down the majority of preschool facilities for children under three – led to support of the traditional ideal of fulltime maternal care provided at home. (Formánková 2010) The Czech Republic has the highest impact of parenthood on women's employment among EU countries (40%; *Indicators for Monitoring the Employment Guidelines 2010*), figures which point to discrimination against mothers in the Czech labour market. (Křížková et al. 2011) It is the combination of low education, the mothering of children under seven years of age and the lack of support for the return of women to the labour market that has such a negative impact. (Formánková – Plasová – Vyhliđal 2011)

By the time Dana was ready to return to the labour market, in 1998, the standards for workers in the care services had changed and the training she had obtained in the early 1990s was no longer sufficient for a job. After an unsuccessful attempt to recover her nursing position, Dana used her cultural and social capital to gain re-employment with her first employer, the millinery factory, but, soon after, the beret-knitting department where she worked was closed down and she became unemployed again. After this, a two-year period of short-term, precarious jobs began.

...and I started working, but, yes, back in the [millinery company], and then they also closed down production, so I was fired....Shortly after that I got a job

in [name of the company – author note], but they gave it to us only for a limited time, for three months...They had a contract so they simply hired people and then let us all go, and there were many of us ... about 20 at that time, and they only kept one person and fired the rest (...). I was so happy that I had a job, and then this again (...), I was unemployed. And I was able to find another job easily, but it was only a short-term one, so I found something from time to time...I even did cleaning for some time...

Dana found herself in a situation many Czech women face when they return to the labour market after spending several years on parental leave. (Křížková et al. 2011) Their social and cultural capital devalues as they lose contact with the labour market and changing requirements of employers. Over 20% of all Czech women have experienced at least some unemployment during the two years following the end of their parental leave. (Tomešová-Bartáková 2009)

In 2000, after more than two years searching for jobs, Dana finally found one in the new production plant of an international electronics producer. Although it was 20 kilometres from her hometown, transport was provided by her employer, so it was easy to reach the workplace. However Dana did not like that the work was organised in long 8 to 12 hour shifts. In 2002, when she was getting divorced, she terminated her employment because she could not cope with the combination of shift work, commuting and care for her children by herself. Before that, her husband had taken care of the children when she had night or afternoon shifts. After the divorce, she would have to leave the children alone. Divorce brought another dimension of marginalization to Dana's already deprived conditions. The low education, limited work experience and lone motherhood of two young children intersect in Dana's story to confront her with severe ongoing existential difficulties and the risk of poverty which lone mothers often face. (Dudová 2009)

Dana remained unemployed for another year, unsuccessfully looking for a job suitable for a single mother with two dependent children. Then she gave up looking and started working shifts in a production plant located in a nearby city. To be able to keep her new job, Dana had to ask her mother to move in with her and to take care of the children when she was at work. Similar to other low-income mothers, Dana had to adopt the 'reliance on kin' strategy as described by Weigt and Richards Solomon. (2008: 639) They argue that, in order to ensure the economic survival of their families, women with low-income jobs often rely fully on kin and kin networks as a work-life reconciliation strategy. (Weigt – Richards Solomon 2008)

After another two years in this factory, Dana became pregnant with her new partner and gave birth to her second daughter in 2005. As the relationship broke down soon afterwards, Dana was left alone with three dependent

children. Since she had a fixed-term employment contract, her job was terminated during her pregnancy and the contract was not renewed. This situation contrasts with the experiences of some highly educated women. Comparison in the wider sample of 58 women's biographies shows that this type of discriminatory practice can also be found in the working paths of highly educated women, such as teachers or administrative workers, while highly educated women in some prestigious professions such as lawyers at least have more choice and power in contractual negotiations. They have a higher chance of avoiding employment on fixed term contracts. (Křížková et al. 2011)

At the time of the interview, Dana was completing her fourth year on the parental benefit and was searching for a job. When her daughter was three, she managed to place her in a kindergarten for four hours a day as permitted by the legislative arrangement for parental benefits, introduced in 2008¹⁷. To get a place in the kindergarten, Dana had to falsely state that she was going to work:

But, well, it is still a problem with kindergartens here to get a place. So I told them that I had a job promised, otherwise who knows if I would get the place (...). They didn't want any confirmation, fortunately, nothing from me. But some friends of mine went to another kindergarten and had to bring their employer's confirmation that they would really be employed, so it is a problem, yes.

Kindergartens require both parents to be employed and employers require confirmation that a place in a kindergarten has been secured for any children. (Kuchařová et al. 2009)

...When you go to employers about any job they want your curriculum vitae and I had written that I was on parental leave (...) so everybody saw it. Then they told me at the employment office that I shouldn't write that, I should write that I was unemployed (...). But they [employers – authors note] ask you anyway. They asked me if I have children and so on, how old they are and if I have any babysitters or what I would do if the child is sick. Or if I could stay later at work sometime, simply stuff like that.

Dana, highly motivated to find a job, identified the changing requirements in the field and taught herself how to use computers to increase her cultural capital. She drafted her first CV and visited online job portals every day to find a job. Even though we could see her attempt to increase her cultural capital which was directed towards finding a job, for Czech employers, maternity is a reason for not hiring women because, regardless of their actual abilities and education level, employers expect a conflict between women's duties at work

¹⁷ Act No. 117/1995 Coll., on State Social Support, Prague: PČR as amended.

and family roles. (Křížková et al. 2008) Although this is a discriminatory practice banned by law, Czech employers often ask women about their family situation and fertility plans¹⁸. Therefore being a single mother with three children puts Dana in an extremely difficult situation when searching for a job and having to respond to employers' questions about her ability to combine work and childcare.

Dana's story represents a biography hugely influenced by the transition process from a planned to a market based economy, a process which had a profound effect on the careers of blue-collar workers. In the state socialist regime, the prestige of blue-collar workers was secured within Communist ideology and protected by strong labour unions. After 1990, there was a distinct drop in the manufacturing sector, while the number of jobs in services, which required higher levels of education, grew. Most of her adult life, Dana worked in flow production and did not have sufficient experience to compensate for deficits in her education and narrow specialization. The long stay out of the labour market due to a family-oriented Czech family policy multiplied the negative impacts of her low education and pushed Dana into a cycle of repeated unemployment. Dana's life strategy could be characterised as a continuous effort to adapt to an increasingly risky society in a post-socialist transition country. The biography of a young, married mother with a blue-collar job, originally without any major problems and good prospects, changed over the course of time, and Dana gradually found herself in a marginalised group of single mothers with low education and significantly limited life and work prospects. We can see how the intersection of disadvantageous factors (low education and motherhood) influences the position of Dana in the labour market. At the same time we have to note that being white, Dana's chance of getting a job, despite the often poor conditions, was and is higher than that of a Roma woman with small children but of the same class¹⁹.

VI. Eva

Eva is a childless waitress, aged 38, with work experience as an employee and as the owner of her own restaurant. She completed her education to be a cook and waitress just before 1989, like Dana, under a state-owned enterprise. After finishing school, she was required to work for the company for at least two years. This was part of the system of education associated with state-owned

¹⁸ A representative survey of Czech parents' work/life strategies showed that 42% of mothers with children under six years of age at the time of hiring or women who had children during employment with their current employer encountered discriminatory questions about their family situation and plans. (Křížková – Vohlídalová 2009)

¹⁹ The biggest ethnic minority in the Czech Republic – Roma – makes up about 3% of the population. The unemployment rate of Roma women is very high, reaching 80% in some regions. Most Roma declare that they have been discriminated against in their access to employment due to their ethnicity. (Romové v České republice 1999)

enterprises under socialism. Waitressing had been a highly valued profession in the period of state socialism giving access to lot of social, economic and symbolic capital. But the economic transformation that started in 1989 radically changed the prestige, wage structure and status of many professions. With the deterioration of the position of low-paid workers – manual (blue collar) or service workers with vocational training, privileged under state socialism – and the improvement of the position of highly paid workers, especially those with higher education (Rutkowski 2001: 33), the symbolic capital of the previously generally profitable professions such as cooks or shop assistants decreased. The symbolic capital of shop assistants, cooks and waiters under state-socialism was a product of the inaccessibility or rarity of goods and services to which the market economy generally allows easy access. (Koukalová 2008) Today the majority of these manual and service professions have shifted to the secondary labour market. (Tomášek – Dudová 2008)

Having finished her vocational training at age 17, Eva moved away from home to work as a waitress in a hotel, living in a dormitory at the place of her employment. After two years there, she went back to live with her parents and found a job nearby. Her job-seeking experience around the age of 20 shows how discriminatory questions about family arrangements and plans represent a ubiquitous part of the recruitment process, even for childless women.

...They ask you everywhere if you have children or plan for them. I definitely think it shouldn't be like that. Of course, they mentioned other reasons, and they didn't say plainly that this was the reason to not hire me, but they definitely thought... "She would like to have children and would leave us to take care of them."

Another type of discrimination that Eva encountered was gender segregation in the labour market and the subsequent gender wage gap. Experiences of horizontal and vertical gender segregation occur frequently in female accounts about work experiences. Notions of whether a woman or a man can or cannot perform a specific job are clearly one of the main structuring elements in the Czech labour market. Eva's account illustrates how in the restaurant and catering industry, gender segregation of tasks and hierarchical positions constitute an institutionalised system of gender differences in prestige and rewards.

... I often heard the typical comment that women should clean the tables. But I basically always did the same work as the men. I dragged crates, and then the man says that it's a woman's job to clean the tables. I was so offended by these things. I think men and women are both the same and spend the same time at work doing the same things; it's no difference if it's a woman or a man.

Interviewer: *Do you think the financial remuneration was also different?*

It was often organised so that the man was a shift manager. It was usually arranged like that, even though he performed the same work, of course. ... So this definitely showed in the remuneration. He was always the head waiter. I don't remember ever seeing a head waitress.

This account also represents Eva's resistance to this discriminatory system. She is well aware of the unfair treatment. What she does not say directly is that she has little room to defend herself against such treatment. Women with higher education and in the professions have greater possibilities of "defending" themselves even if not directly through court enforcement of gender equality legislation. (Havelková 2010) They also have greater opportunities to seek and find other jobs with better conditions. (Křížková et al. 2011)

In the same period, Eva also experienced the exploitation of paid work by restaurant industry employers. She describes employers' practices of hiring either on short-term and fixed-term contracts, which results in highly precarious employment without protection or benefits, or contract employment with minimum wages and without a flexible wage component. As far as waiters and waitresses are concerned, their employers expect that they will earn a significant part of their salary from tips, but once again this system makes their job very insecure. It is not suitable for parents with children who seek job security and decent working conditions. As we see in Dana's story, women with low education also have to deal with specific gender-based discrimination and motherhood-based discrimination together with the general increase in insecurity (Heitlinger 1993) which had an impact on the position of blue-collar workers after the transition to a capitalist society. (Keller 2005; Vecernik 2001)

After about a year at her second job, Eva met a man and started living with him. Her partner, a foreigner doing business in the Czech Republic, was wealthy, so Eva left her job. In her opinion, she had no need to work because he provided for both of them. Also they travelled a lot, and she wanted to spend as much time as possible with him. It seems that in this period Eva did not realise the impact on her future employability of this inactivity with respect to the workplace and of dependence on a man as a provider. The tendency to take up traditional attitudes to the division of work and family roles has been found to be more pronounced for women and men with low education. (Habodászová 2010) The consequence of her economic inactivity had an impact on Eva's biography when, after approximately four years, when she was 26, her partner died in a car crash. This was an immense shock for Eva. She had no financial security and was dependent on her parents' help, so she moved back in with them. A year and a half later, after she had undergone psychological treatment,

she was offered the lease of a restaurant by an acquaintance. She decided to start a private business. Eva commented that she had always wanted to be her own boss rather than an ordinary employee and was happy that she had an opportunity to try the demanding business of running a restaurant.

Because I had employees there, I had to watch things carefully. I had to be there because they would steal the pub away. I really had to watch closely; I had to be there all day long to know about everything that was going on in there. And when it was necessary I simply worked there. In the kitchen or as a waitress, I provided for my own supplies, I was taking care of the paperwork, everything about it. It was so demanding on time. It was real work from morning until evening, every day. ...We basically made an agreement that I would try it for two years. I did it for a year, then for two years, and after these two years I thought this was pointless, I was a slave.

Eva's good social capital gave her the opportunity to try out entrepreneurship under favourable conditions. However, she describes how the entrepreneurship vision of freedom turned into a reality of never-ending work and the need to be present on site and oversee every worker and every task. Finally, after two years, she decided to leave the business. She used her abilities obtained from her entrepreneurship experience, and this time worked as a restaurant manager. Shortly after that, however, Eva's mother fell ill with cancer and Eva decided to take care of her full time, together with her father. Due to the low availability of part-time or flexible employment opportunities in the Czech labour market (Křížková et al. 2009), and the lack of employer and institutional support for a combination of paid work and care, Eva's only option was to leave her job to take care of her dying mother intensively for three months. During this time she realised that she would prefer not to return to restaurant work and so underwent a requalification course, organised on weekends, to be a beautician. When her mother died, Eva opened a private beauty parlour. She describes the change of profession and her choice to become a beautician as follows:

So I took the course and went to try another business. ... I had always wanted to work alone, work for myself. It took a lot of time to build clientele. It was definitely a year before I managed to pay for everything and established regular customers (...). But it depends on the character, I never liked anyone working as my superior and I prefer doing work my way. And what I do, I do and nobody interferes. It is a big thing in business, it is not about money, not about what I earn, but about satisfaction, that in the first place I like the work, I feel fulfilled, and in the second place I am satisfied with myself.

The decision to absolutely change their field of work and start another business is more typical of women than men. (Křížková 2007) Eva's explanation of her new business venture demonstrates once again her need for independence at work. Nevertheless, there remains a question of the extent to which gender-stereotypical re-qualification and self-employment is a way out of the marginalisation of low educated women in the labour market and a way out of unstable employment and income disadvantage, especially in the current situation that is heavily impacted by the economic crisis and austerity measures, for example ongoing pension reforms and other social security cuts. Eva's advantage was that she did not have to invest heavily at the beginning because she leased the premises fully equipped. However, a private business always bears some risk and Eva was well aware of it when she compared the position of employees and entrepreneurs in her narrative, in particular the fact that entrepreneurs have no legal claim to paid leave and other benefits. On the other hand, a private business can bring flexibility in work organisation and time. According to Eva, the courage to start working privately was probably underpinned to a large extent by the fact that she was childless, even though this childlessness was not a planned decision.

Eva's story illustrates how childlessness does not necessarily allow women with low education to get out of disadvantaged positions in the labour market. This is especially true for the Czech Republic, a country with familialist social policy and institutions (Saxonberg – Sirovátka 2007), heavily limiting the choices of women, in particular, women with low education, in precarious job positions with low economic independence and low economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Eva's biography illustrates the consequences of the significant decreases in symbolic capital of waitressing as a profession during the transition to a market based society when work conditions, such as security and pay, deteriorated significantly. Her decision to leave the labour market while living with her wealthy partner shows the tendency of some low educated women towards rather traditional choices that can have negative consequences for their further working paths. Fortunately, despite Eva's low cultural capital, she was able to use her social networks to later start her own business under favourable conditions.

The need to combine work and childcare often puts low-educated women at an income disadvantage. Eva's story shows that even childless women are not exempt from discrimination against motherhood in the Czech Republic. They are seen by employers as "potential mothers", likely to request long parental leave in the future, and similarly discriminated against in terms of access to positions with responsibility and good wages. But it is not only potential motherhood that causes problems. Even childless Eva could not escape gendered expectations with regard to care when she decided to take care of her

ill mother and had to leave her job because it was not possible to combine work with care.

VII. Conclusions

In their work experiences, the gender and class status of women with low education intersect. They are not only exposed to the gender-based segregation of the labour market, their disadvantage is based, to a growing degree, on their limited cultural capital. In the process of transformation and wage differentiation in Czech society, they are slowly being shifted to low-wage jobs on the secondary labour market. The negative impact of low levels of cultural capital is further reinforced by gender norms and caring responsibilities. Deterioration can be seen in job security, remuneration, prestige, working conditions and the sources of solutions to potential disadvantages. Compared to women located at higher levels of the labour market and with higher education, the choices and negotiation power of low educated women in employment relations and in their care strategies are very limited. (Křížková et al. 2011) The analysis of the two cases of women at similar intersections of class and gender show how class and gender interact and mutually constitute each other. It also illustrates the usefulness of the intersectional approach in sociology. Using the dynamic variant of intersectionality and a biographic approach allowed us to grasp the structural changes of organizing power in the move from a state socialist to a market based society as lived, experienced and reflected in the life course of women with low education.

Dana and Eva both started their secondary education under the state socialist regime when education levels among women were significantly lower than today. At that time, prestige was based in sectors that have been, in more recent times, pushed to the periphery, such as the blue-collar sector and some services. The narratives demonstrate that these women with low education even selected their area of study expecting that it would assure them economic as well as symbolic capital. During the process of transition, however, the labour market became strongly differentiated according to education level. With the shift of a major portion of production from machinery to services and a large section of the services and production sector to the secondary labour market, blue-collar jobs, technical specialisations and work in food-processing and services – work in which Eva and Dana were qualified – lost much of its symbolic capital. These two women found themselves in the secondary labour market, in a situation of unstable employment, with income disadvantage, and exposed to gender discrimination, social exclusion and exploitation of their work.

These two women differ considerably in the amount of their social capital. Eva accumulated significantly more social capital than Dana, perhaps because

of Eva's regional location in a big city with low unemployment and opportunities to create contacts and because of Dana's prolonged periods out of the labour market mainly due to motherhood. Such periods often put women into a type of social isolation. Eva was able to use her social capital when starting her own business while Dana's lack of social capital hindered her job search. In Dana's case, her low cultural capital and weak orientation toward the constantly changing and sometimes conflicting information about family policy resulted in unfavorable decisions.

The connecting aspect of the two biographies is the identification with the dominant gender stereotypes, which have tremendous impact on Eva's and Dana's working life. This aspect of the story was not highlighted in the analysis, as the focus was the experience of women with low social and cultural capital with the transition and the intersection of risks in their life stories. However, the impact of gender stereotypical decisions on women's working biography as well as the extent of agency in their decision making represents a fruitful area for new research.

In the context of Czech familialist social policy and a labour market that disprefers the combination of paid employment with care, low qualified women are disadvantaged in at least three intersecting dimensions: gender, caring responsibilities and class. Even though their family situations are quite different, the gendered burden of care connects these two women; they are both limited by familialist social policy and a lack of measures for combining work and care.

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