

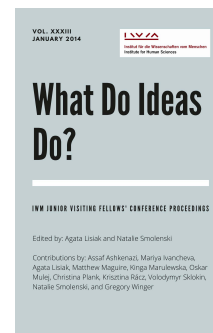
# Continuity in Rupture: The Paradoxical History of the Women's Movement in Bulgaria

Mariya Ivancheva

IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXXIII

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*Abstract: This paper briefly narrates the history of the Bulgarian women's movement. I make two claims: On the one hand, I show that, due to two abrupt regime changes in 1944 and 1989, it is difficult to speak of one women's movement in Bulgaria. Even though a movement dealing with women's issues has long been present in Bulgaria, there has been little to no continuity in terms of membership and processes of learning between movements in different historical eras (before 1944, 1944-1989, and since 1989). On the other hand, however, I argue that there is a paradoxical continuity within this movement. Despite changes in the actors involved and the frames utilized by the movement in different historical periods, it has largely been the purview of an establishment of elite women, well-positioned to cooperate with the state and international high-level political actors, but with few links to the grassroots. A picture emerges of a movement characterized by an elite-driven continuity of rupture: a repeated a historical pattern in which elites skilled in the accumulation and management of state capital abolish and re-found the women's movement anew.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper narrates the history of the women's movement in Bulgaria.[1] Due to two abrupt regime changes in 1944 and 1989, it is difficult to speak of one women's movement in Bulgaria, as there has been little continuity in terms of the actors and mobilizing frames. Thus, one can speak of fractures in the history of the women's movement which resulted in the lack of intergenerational change and learning. At the same time, I argue that despite the historical fractures, there is a paradoxical continuity within the movement for women's rights as a whole. The change of the actors involved and frames utilized by the movement in different historical periods notwithstanding, the women's movement in Bulgaria has remained an elite structure, represented mostly by women professionals. Close to and cooperative with state power and international elite political actors, they have eclipsed feminist interpretive frames and have not developed horizontal structures for the democratic participation and empowerment of women.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the women's movement in Bulgaria was one of the strongest in Europe. With the advent of state socialism in 1944, this movement was abolished, and its functions were accommodated within different state institutions. The strong women's presence in the Party had policy impact, but functioning within a repressive regime with little sympathy for internal critique, the actors dealing with women's issues were unable to use feminist frames of mobilization or rhetoric against Party policy. True to the Party's imperatives, they concentrated on top-down governance and eclipsed bottom-up self-organizing. Another shift occurred in post-socialist Bulgaria, when socialist-era women's organizations were abolished and a new sphere of NGOs emerged. These have had a significant impact on policy, especially on the topic of domestic violence. Yet, a feminist movement articulating the problems of women in a gendered and emancipatory way has been absent both during state socialism and in the post-socialist era.

In this paper I conjecture some of the possible reasons for such an absence. The lack of continuity between generations in the women's movement in Bulgaria and the need to articulate new frames of collective action in new realities are characteristic of the Bulgarian women's movement. This movement has, on the whole, suppressed internal debates as well as generational transitions and regeneration due to the necessity to appeal to the state – for legitimacy under state socialism and for funding during post-socialism. Thus the profile of women in the movement as highly-educated experts has been reproduced. In both periods – 1944-1989 and 1989 until today – what could be called a women's movement has remained a professionalized field of educated women who have accumulated credentials and state capital (Bourdieu). This form of symbolic capital allowed them to learn the discursive codes required to negotiate with a highly bureaucratic state apparatus and enabled them to have strong influence on policy. Not challenging these requirements, the Bulgarian women's movement remained confined to elite groups, who did not touch base with rank-and-file Bulgarian women except as victims and clients. Having to prioritize liberal feminist frames of mobilization to suit national and international partners, they eclipsed more emancipatory radical and socialist approaches to dealing the defense of autonomy of women against oppression from patriarchal and capitalist structures within society.

In her work on the US women's movement, Nancy Whittier has used the case study of Columbus, Ohio in order to develop a generational approach in the study of social movements ("Political Generations"). The approach Whittier suggests does not contradict the three main paradigms of social movement research: resource mobilization theory, which looks into the resource allocation and institutionalization of movements; the new social movement paradigm, which looks into the identity politics of movements; and opportunity structure theory, which looks into types of regimes and institutional cultures (see e.g. Tarrow; Edelman). Instead, Whittier explores another question: how movements change or achieve continuity over time despite generational shifts, through the construction of new identities, and under internal and external pressures. In this, Whittier insists on calling the phenomenon which she studies "the women's movement" (singular) (760).

This insistence on continuity rather than fragmentation and rupture describes the *longue durée* development of what Whittier presents as a rather robust movement able to achieve self-regeneration. Whittier says “ Shifts in political opportunity provide an impetus for change; generational processes of recruitment... are one micro-level mechanism by which such change occurs” (761). In the current paper, I show how instances of regime change over the last century have rather foreclosed political and discursive opportunity structures for much regeneration and continuity in the women’s movement in Bulgaria. By political opportunity structures, I mean the overall institutional arrangement, openness, and support of a system to processes of social change that impact it. Discursive opportunity structures are, in turn, those cultural elements in the broader environment which facilitate and constrain successful social movement framing (Koopmans and Statham; McCammon). The closure of political and discursive opportunity structures upon regime change in 1989 therefore has led not to a single continuous women’s movement, but rather repeated a historical pattern of *abolishing* and *re-founding* the women’s movement anew. However, one structural continuity is identifiable across all eras of women’s political mobilization in Bulgaria: the dependence of organizations which deal with women’s issues on state legitimacy and funding. The continuity that exists is thus, paradoxically, a continuity of rupture—always articulated in the idiom of state capital.

I employ Mario Diani’s conceptualization of social movements as “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities” (1). This concept is expanded further by Sonia Alvarez and Raka Ray, who argue that feminist organizations can be characterized as expansive, polycentric, heterogenous discursive fields of action which form a social movement web of core activists and supporters (Alvarez, “ Advocating Feminism,” “ Beyond NGO - ization?” ; Ray). In this understanding, a movement escapes a fixed definition but is defined through its fluidity and contested aspirations and understandings, which gain articulation within the feminist field (Alvarez, “ Advocating Feminism” 184-185). Although these theories have been developed to highlight the multiplicity and fluidity of social movements (particularly of the feminist movement), however, I hope to show that in Bulgaria, the women’s movement has been characterized by a “web of core activists and supporters” with a rather uniform profile of “aspirations and understandings” and rather inflexible “shared collective identities.”

To conceptualize the relation between state power and social movements, I envision the state as “a more or less distinct ensemble of multifunctional institutions and organizations which have at best a partial, provisional and unstable political identity and operational unity and which involve a complex over-determined dynamic” (Jessop 339). This understanding of the state also nurtures an analysis of social movements as positioned against this complex power field and its agents. I augment this definition with Bourdieu’s concept of the state as a field of concentration of different species of capital – coercive and economic, but also informational/cultural and symbolic (Bourdieu 4). In addition to these, a new type of capital emerges which Bourdieu calls state capital (*capitale étatique*). It “enables the state to exercise power over the different fields and

particular species of capital” (Bourdieu 4). Its holders have decision-making power over the rates of conversion between different types of capital and their reproduction (Bourdieu 4-5).

The accumulation of state capital by the Bulgarian women’s movement has been one of the aspects of its professionalization and rigidification. In this process, a required code of conduct; acceptable qualifications; occupational closure; and a hierarchy between the knowledge authority of the movement and its broader constituency have all been established (Cavanagh; Witz). Thus, while the state did not impose this hierarchy on the movement, the movement negotiated with the state its own closure to the broader citizenry, including less ‘professional’ parts of the NGO scene. The story of the Bulgarian women’s movement is therefore one of elite, educated women who achieved important policy successes within the confines developed by the state. Not willing to challenge the structural conditions of gender inequality in Bulgarian society, they worked within liberal interpretive frames to garner support for the legal defense of rights and liberties of individual women without demanding systemic change. Their emphasis on ‘expertise’ has foreclosed the bottom-up mobilizing of non-elite women and has averted the articulation of socialist and radical feminisms which oppose the capitalist and patriarchal system as a major obstacle to women’s liberation (Mueller and McCarthy) .

## **2. The first rupture: from “bourgeois” to “socialist” women’s movement**

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The Bulgarian women’s movement was strong throughout the 20 th century. Women played the roles not only of wives and mothers, but also citizens and workers (Ghodsee, “ Rethinking State Socialist Mass Women’s Organizations” ). Numerous organizations were active since the turn of the century on at least two levels: on the one hand they were charities, promoting social work and assisting the urban poor and rural populations (Popova 82-83). On the other hand, female voices from the educated urban upper classes, articulating positions shared within Western and regional feminist networks, were becoming prominent within the public sphere. They demanded voting and property rights as well as women’s access to certain professional fields and higher positions (Daskalova).

In interwar Bulgaria, women’s unions were present along all parts of the political spectrum. Despite the fact that within the socialist movement feminism was mostly condemned as “bourgeois”, unions of socialist and social democratic women operated during the interwar era (Daskalova 421-423). Even the socialist feminist activist Clara Zetkin admitted in 1922 that, along with Germany, Bulgaria had one of the strongest women’s movements in Europe (Zetkin, “ Organising Working Women” ). In this era, women gained for the first time the right to vote, maternity leave, and contraception and abortion (Ghodsee, “ Return of the King” ). Still, there was no space left for autonomous grassroots’ organizing among women and feminists without the supervision of the increasingly repressive state.

A rapid historical turning point occurred with the regime change in 1944 . While making the women's movement more centralized and official, it brought to power a significant number of women and showed advancements on a number of key indicators of women's empowerment and independence. During state socialism (1944-1989), the women's movement was centralized into a unit within the Female Department of the Fatherland Front. The "Comrade courts" were given the task of intervening in family issues and deciding how to proceed in cases of alcoholism, domestic violence, and adultery (Stoilova 28). Within the Party apparatus, the women's question was initially silenced: even women from the older generation of Party considered all gender inequality issues resolved with the advent of communism (Sharkova 65).

Still, a number of structures emerged within the Party apparatus which advocated for women's rights. They gained momentum and found their own voice to criticize the Party from within. They presented softly but persistently issues of gender inequality, advocating for legislation affecting women, and litigated against state-owned enterprises which violated this legislation (Sharkova). A significant center of activity for the movement after 1968—controlled by the Party but powerful in its new frame and voice—was the Committee of Democratic Bulgarian Women (CDBW), later renamed the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM). It ran a newspaper called *The Woman Today* (*Zhenata Dnes*) (Sharkova). An important gain from this era was the new Labor Code (1973), which gave women longer maternity leave which also counted toward the mother's pension. It also granted special protection to single mothers and obliged the state to fund nurseries and crèches (Stoilova 93).

CDBW, which was generally dedicated to the international representation of Bulgarian women, was active especially in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1970s and 1980s some of its members had prominent roles within the Forums of the International Decade of Women of the UN (Ghodsee, " Rethinking State Socialist Mass Women's Organizations" ). CDBW drew their funding from subscriptions to *The Woman Today*, so even during state socialism they had to be entrepreneurial and compete for an audience at least as much as do contemporary NGO publications. The activity of the CDBW was strong internationally, but its activity on a national level started to dwindle in the decade preceding the fall of state socialism (Stoilova). Whereas some scholars are more eager to see the whole socialist period as one which granted unprecedented rights and benefits to women (Ghodsee, " Feminism - by - Design" ), others see a shift in women's politics with the economic crisis of the 1980s (Stoilova). This could be seen in the new emphasis: the ideal of the international proletarian woman worker gave way to that of the frugal housewife, economizing to support the family (Stoilova 37).

Despite these developments, however, the fall of state socialism in 1989 still came as a surprising and abrupt turning point. The subsequent economic transformation affected both citizens and institutions subordinated to the state and led to the total dissolution of the former women's organizations. Research done in Eastern Europe more generally (Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market* ) and Bulgaria specifically (Ghodsee, " Feminism - by - Design"; Russinova) shows that the transition to liberal democracy and market capitalism after 1989 had ambiguous effects on women in the former socialist world. On

the one hand, while socialist regimes had made huge progress in terms of the equal economic participation of women, this shift came with a price. Framing women primarily as workers, state socialist governments stigmatized reproductive labor and domestic work and created a quadruple burden: women had to be workers, mothers, wives, and publicly engaged in political activities. In that era “the women’s question” was treated as isolated and not part of the overall social structure that was in need of change (Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market* 4-5).

On the other hand, while the post-socialist period was marked by an increase of political rights and opportunities to participate in national and international civil society initiatives, women lost significant economic securities and access to welfare. Not only was the women’s question outsourced to the NGO sector, the quadruple burden did not disappear but was intensified and complicated. Women had less labor rights. Unemployment was rampant, but even those who worked suffered from a decrease in the purchasing value of their salaries, and many of their benefits and securities were cut. Even those employed had to seek extra employment to make ends meet (Russinova 92, 96-97). At the same time, a semantic gap was created by the new regime. The new civil society emerged in a discursive environment determined by the symbolic burden of “the end of history” in the final victory of liberal democracy against socialism (Fukuyama). Functioning under foreign pressure to respond to the values of a free market economy, the new state administration and the emergent NGO sphere tried to break with all legacies – good or bad – of state socialism. All previous experience and modes of analysis had to be abolished. This also required that the whole process of women’s organizing started anew.

Eastern European women activists quickly accommodated to Western feminist and women’s organizations in their shift – around the late 1990s – from skepticism toward state institutions, to cooperation and participation in policy-making (Einhorn, “Citizenship, Civil Society and Gender Mainstreaming” ). The socialist emphasis on equality and economic participation lost not only its economic basis, but also its political legitimacy. Declared “totalitarian”, discarded not just in its repressive practices but also *en grosse*, the socialist regime left the scene of history along with most of the structures it had created. CDBW was dissolved in 1990 and all its property taken away (Ghodsee, “Rethinking State Socialist Mass Women’s Organizations” ; Sharkova). And while the mobilization around issues like domestic violence (undertaken by post-transition Bulgarian women’s organizations) is a rather positive example of women’s impact on policy, within the broader field of power relations, it stands alone against a practically absent feminist movement in Bulgaria.

### **3. Second rupture: from “socialist” to “liberal” women’s movement**

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The story of the movement against domestic violence, in a nutshell, portrays the post-1989 history of the women’s movement in Bulgaria. In the middle of the 1990s some women, practitioners of psychology and law, developed an interest in the topic of domestic violence. While some entered this new terrain through practice in social

services, others were recruited through international forums, especially the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Tisheva). Many women in the movement attended international conferences in the 1990s, among them, some of the key figures of the movement: Genoveva Tisheva and Stanimira Hadjimitova went to a meeting in Vienna preparing European women for the Beijing conference in 1995, and they were joined by Daniela Gorbunova at the Beijing conference itself (Ivancheva). It was there where they were introduced to the issue of domestic violence. A key impetus was given by the organization Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights (AHR). Its members asked the Bulgarian NGO representatives they met in Beijing to help them prepare a report, *Domestic Violence in Bulgaria*. The research was carried out by the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation (BGRF), an organization which Genoveva Tisheva founded in order to conduct the study and which since has remained central to lobbying the state for domestic violence legislation (Tisheva).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, BGRF and a number of other organizations were engaged in projects providing psychological and legal consulting as well as shelter to victims of domestic violence. Initially based in Sofia, their practices caught the attention of different women's organizations. Women from around the country, including self-organized groups in the countryside, began calling on them to provide training (Ivancheva). This training was provided by Sofia-based organizations, which helped to open new NGOs and centers for psychological support for women victims of violence in Plovdiv, Varna, Bourgas, Silistra, and Pernik (Tisheva). While some organizations specialized in shelters and others in awareness-raising, BGRF provided legal advice through a project sponsored in 1999-2002 by the Dutch Foundation Oxfam-NOVIB (Tisheva). By the end of the 1990s, it was clear to practitioners that new legislation on domestic violence was needed. In 2001 many of the NGOs gathered around a shared cause: during the 16 Days against Gender-Based Violence, they spoke of the need for legislation (Tisheva). The BGRF and other NGOs with a legal focus pressed the organizations present to join forces and campaign for a law (Stoilova).

The decision to focus their activities not on awareness-raising and education, but on lobbying and litigation had an impact on the development of the movement. Women lawyers and other highly educated professionals became central as experts (Ivancheva). While the NGOs converged around the necessity of a new law, the American Bar Association's office in Bulgaria provided a space where women lawyers could draft a bill. They did so by consulting women from other NGOs who worked on the issue (Tisheva). When the bill was ready, it coincided with an opportunity: after the 2001 legislative election, 26% of the Parliament were women (Kostadinova). Human rights advocates from Bulgarian NGOs organized trainings with women MPs, such as BGRF's training, "Bringing Gender Equality to the Agenda of the Bulgarian Parliament," which was funded by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Yet this strategy did not seem to be sufficient to attract the attention of women Parliamentarians to the issue of domestic violence. The participation of BGRF's lawyers Genoveva Tisheva and Daniela Gorbunova on the National Radio, however, appealed to an ambitious young female MP – lawyer Marina Dikova (Tisheva).

Utilizing networks of women lawyers in the Justice Ministry, a working group “for the elaboration of a draft law on quick measures for the protection of victims of domestic violence” was formed. It included representatives of the Ministries of the Interior, Labor and Social Policy, Health, and Justice, as well as the Sofia City Bar, the Chief Prosecutor’s Office and members of NGOs. After years of lobbying, the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence was passed in 2005 (Tisheva). The Law was celebrated as a progressive piece of legislation both by national and international actors (AHR; IRBC). Bulgaria was undeniably one of the few countries in Europe to have laws explicitly targeted at the protection against domestic violence. It defined domestic violence and acts of perpetration and installed the norm of an immediate procedure for restrictive orders against perpetrators. It allowed courts to order violent offenders out of the home (EUCPN). It required the establishment of a National Coordinator for Protection against Domestic Violence, based in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and led to the training and creation of instructions for police and legal professionals. The impact of the Law was discussed among legal professionals as encouraging and positive (AHR).

As a result of women’s NGO lobbying, institutions within the Parliament and the Ministries of Justice and Internal Affairs began being more cooperative with the women’s NGOs and lawyers, leading to the adoption of several significant pieces of legislation in the early 2000s: the Child Protection Law (2000); Law Against Human Trafficking (2003); Law on Protection against Discrimination (2004); and Law on Protection against Domestic Violence (2005) (Stoykova 2007). A shift in funding took place with the 2007 accession of Bulgaria into the European Union. The main sources of US and other international sponsorship were withdrawn. NGOs in Bulgaria came to be “seriously underfunded” (AHR 54), with principal sponsorship coming from the EU and administrated through bureaucracy-heavy state agencies. The reorientation of women’s organizations toward collecting state funding also had to change in order to respond to this new conjuncture. Initially, no state funding was provided for domestic-violence-related services, but lobbying continued, and gradually some amendments to the Law were added to grant this funding. Since 2010, Funding has been secured through the Ministry of Justice. A new system of legal instruments codifying the practice of state financing was tailored by diverse state institutions and NGOs.

This process has had a strong impact on the development of the women’s movement in Bulgaria. While the Law on Domestic Violence and the surrounding legislative texts and mechanisms are a reality, Bulgaria still lacks a law and any serious measures to promote gender equality. Some organizations, including BGRF, have been engaged in lobbying for a Gender Equality Law, but it has not passed. The establishment of an Alliance for Protection against Domestic Violence has created an umbrella organization through which women’s NGOs can lobby for new legislation and state funding. A number of women lawyers from the movement have shifted positions between the NGO sphere and the Ministry of Justice, securing funding for the movement. The organizations in the Alliance, considered respectable, professional, and expert, have secured funding for their activities. While initially they provided training to self-organized groups in the country, now these groups, seen as ‘not professional enough’, are not considered eligible for funding and are left to linger in the field. With their time increasingly devoted to creating



leverage for services and legislation-related issues within the state administration, the members of the women's movement are less and less engaged with grassroots initiatives. They use non-feminist frames to speak to power, eclipsing the economic analysis of domestic violence to emphasize the individual treatment thereof (Ivancheva).

#### 4. Coda

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The lack of generational change in Bulgarian movements dealing with women's issues in certain eras has made it difficult to think of continuity within one single movement. Even if we can designate with the "women's movement" title the conjuncture of all movements which have fought for women's issues in Bulgaria, we can still discern three periods with little continuity in terms of members and focus of their struggles. Not being able to create enduring structures that survive regime change, the movements which dealt with women's problems always had to start anew. The centralization of the state during socialism and its weakening vis-à-vis international pressures for liberal democracy and a free market economy in the post-socialist period both created opportunity openings for mobilization and consolidation of a single movement. Yet, there was no internal debate, contestation, or process of intergenerational learning or conflict within the movement's different cohorts. The need felt by every new regime to condemn discursively the previous one and do away with its structures created unbridgeable semantic and organizational gaps in both 1944 and 1989.

Against this background, what still remains peculiar is a discrete continuity within the generally fractured history of the Bulgarian women's movement. In order to remain afloat despite state and market dependencies, the movements' representatives have had to frame their demands in ways not opposing the order of the day. Both under state socialism and in the post-socialist era, the movement has been organized by women from the professional elites, who developed strong links within the state apparatus. Using their state capital, accumulated in cooperation with the structures of the state and further international bureaucratic entities, they have remained concentrated on lobbying, legislative change, and policy implementation. While they have been very successful in promoting top-down reform, they have mostly lost connection with local organizations and have, arguably, contributed to the decay of grassroots organizing among women in the country. Thus, women who have not been part of the elite and have not accumulated similar professional credentials and capital remain clients to services provided by the movement, rather than agents of change.

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**Mariya Ivancheva** holds a PhD in Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Central European University in Budapest. Her dissertation work on the topic of the role of socialist intellectuals in the higher education reform in Bolivarian Venezuela was sponsored by Marie Curie and Wenner-Gren research fellowships. Mariya's main research interests are the history and legacy of socialism in Eastern Europe and Latin America; the anthropology of the state; social movement studies; theories of intellectuals and elites; and alternative models of development and social change. Since the completion of her

dissertation, Mariya has been a Tsvetan Stoyanov Junior Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna (2013) and an Advanced Academia Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in Sofia (2014).

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1 This paper is the result of a broader case-study of Bulgarian women's NGOs (Ivancheva). It was part of the comparative collaborative research project "Comparing the Women's Movement's Influence on Domestic Violence Policy: A model of critical institutionalization" (Krizsan and Popa). The latter project grew out of the "Gender-based violence" component of a larger cross-country comparative study, "Quality in Gender + Equality Policies" (QUING), coordinated by the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in the period 2006-2011 (QUING).

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*Preferred citation:* Ivancheva, Mariya. 2014. Continuity in Rupture: The Paradoxical History of the Women's Movement in Bulgaria. In: What Do Ideas Do?, ed. A. Lisiak, N. Smolenski, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 33.