



Women and the gendered politics of work in Central and Eastern Europe, and internationally, in the twentieth century: activism, governance, and scale

Alexandra Ghiț, Veronika Helfert, Zhanna Popova, Jelena Tešija, Eszter Varsa, Ivelina Masheva & Susan Zimmermann

To cite this article: Alexandra Ghiț, Veronika Helfert, Zhanna Popova, Jelena Tešija, Eszter Varsa, Ivelina Masheva & Susan Zimmermann (2023) Women and the gendered politics of work in Central and Eastern Europe, and internationally, in the twentieth century: activism, governance, and scale, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 31:2, 227-240, DOI: [10.1080/25739638.2023.2227512](https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2023.2227512)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2023.2227512>



Published online: 12 Jul 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 714



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Women and the gendered politics of work in Central and Eastern Europe, and internationally, in the twentieth century: activism, governance, and scale

This issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* brings together a set of articles that discuss the history of women's labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe and transnationally. The seven contributions are the result of recent and ongoing primary research within the research project *Women's Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Transnationally, From the Age of Empires to the Late 20th Century* (ZARAH). In our research we aim to advance approaches to the history of women's labour struggles that are long-term, transregional, integrative, and critical. Our overarching goals are: to contribute to establishing the chronology and cartography of women's labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe and adjacent territories; to explore this activism's cross-border, cross-regional and transnational dimensions; to conceive of its variety in terms of worldview, repertoires, and agendas within a common conceptual framework which contextualizes and examines from a critical perspective all varieties of activism; and to "think into" the global history of labour activism the labour struggles of women from Central and Eastern Europe (Çağatay et al., [forthcoming](#)). We define women's labour activism broadly as action and organizing to improve the labour conditions and life circumstances of lower and working-class women and their communities.

The cluster of articles presents selected elements of our research that revolve around two large, interrelated issues. These, we argue, must be centrally addressed when pursuing the overarching goals defined above. The first issue concerns the relationship between women's labour struggles, on the one hand, and governance, on the other. Governance includes the regulatory frameworks that shape institutions and the practices characterizing the "behaviour" of institutions, ranging from social movement institutions (including, e.g. trade unions, cooperatives, and women's and workers' associations), through institutions of the layered state, to international networks and organizations that involved state and/or social movement actors (Bereni and Revillard 2018; Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2013; Shin 2016; Storrs 2000; Wilhoit 2017). We pursue, in other words, an integrative approach to the history of women's labour activism, arguing that to capture the full range of such activism, we need to consider three (repeatedly overlapping and entangled) varieties: women's action within or via various "classical" social movements; their "unorganized" or "spontaneous" activism, a focus well established in feminist labour history; and women's involvement – within and beyond the confines of social movement activism – with the various dimensions of how women's work was governed. Such

We provide short biographical notes on the authors of this introduction alongside their individual contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

dimensions include the creation and implementation of international or national policy frameworks and legal scripts, the politics of women's work pursued by state or state-aligned agencies, and the negotiation of power and position on the shop floor.

This brings us to the second concept at the core of the seven articles: the question of how women's labour activism was shaped by scale and scale shifts. Here, we consider the rootedness of such activism in, and its involvement with, local, national, and international arenas of women's labour activism, i.e. the multiple scales on which this activism unfolded. Engaging with the politics of scale as shaping and characterizing women's labour activism, we need to consider the travel, accommodation, and negotiation of activist repertoires and agendas along and between different scales (Bantman et al. 2015, Soule and Roggebrand 2019; Franzaway and Margaret Fonow 2011; Kekk and Sikkink 1998). We practice a critical and integrative approach to the history of women's labour activism by concretely investigating rather than assuming transnational interaction and transfer. We find highly variegated degrees of influence and interaction in terms of multi-scale policy transfers and actor interactions. For the study of labour struggles of women in and from Central and Eastern Europe, an integrative approach to governance and scale, captured in such a manner and combined with a critical perspective on how women engaged with these issues is, we argue, crucial for three reasons.

First, governance and scale are at the core of stereotypical views on Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, such views have constructed and reified this region as marked by authoritarianism and social atomization, corruption, and entrenched underdevelopment. Regarding labour struggles in general and women's labour struggles in particular, these views find expression in several tropes. Examples include, for the pre-1945 period, women's alleged marginal role in labour activism due to "traditional" gender regimes that reified women's distinct backwardness, and, for the post-1945 period, the top-down character of communist-led labour policies which allegedly reduced women functionaries to puppets and women workers to victims of double or triple (labour) burdens – over-exploitation implied to be specific to the gender regimes of state-socialist systems.

Second and conversely, serious engagement with the full history of the Central and Eastern European region and women's labour struggles in and emerging from the region must go beyond challenging or proving such stereotypes wrong. Writing such a full history requires the development of approaches that are both critical and integrative. Examining women's labour struggles within a conceptual framework that is inclusive of all varieties of governance and ambitions to capture the specificities of these struggles at and across various scales helps achieve this goal.

Finally, analysed from such a perspective, the labour struggles of women in and from Central and Eastern Europe can be fully integrated into the global history of labour struggles and studies focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. Such a perspective can contribute to the development of a more integrative global history of labour struggles that gives equal space to the full variety of histories of labour activism.

In the following sections, we situate the seven contributions which span the period from the early twentieth century to the 1980s, in the long-term history, first, of activist engagement and the involvement of women with varieties of governance as described above, and, second, the scales and travels along and across scales of women's activism and political action throughout the twentieth century. Discussing governance, we point to intertwined issues of scale, and while discussing scale, we return to issues of

governance where relevant. In the concluding section we list themes of central importance for the study of women's labour activism within and beyond Central and Eastern Europe, pointing to the questions raised by the seven articles and the contributions they make to some of these larger themes.

Governance

During the twentieth century, Central and Eastern European lands experienced multiple turns and changes in terms of political systems and governance, with an array of repercussions for the fate and fortune of labour activism. We argue that if we are to write a wide-ranging and long-term history of labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, we need to address a set of overarching questions engaging with the relationship between multiple forms of governance as described above and the history of women's labour struggles. How did the varieties of governance, emerging and changing in connection with political and economic development and rupture, impact these struggles? Did changing frameworks of governance generate more room for manoeuvre for such struggles? Which repertoires of action and agendas of labour activism could unfold within such newly generated frameworks? What were the possibilities and limitations of women's labour activism to transform any of these frameworks when trying to advance the labour interests of women and their communities? How and why did women activists align themselves with governance frameworks that contributed to the marginalization of some groups of women and certain types of labour interests? Implicit in these overarching questions are our claims that there is no historically privileged site of labour struggles (e.g. the system of parliamentary democracy combined with a market economy and classical trade unions), that women's labour activism needs to be analysed in a critical manner, and that all labour struggles must be understood and studied as forming part of a variable and dynamic relationship with similarly variable elements of governance. Taken together, the seven contributions unearth a rich variety of ways women's labour activism engaged with weaker and stronger, organized and erratic, and more and less participatory forms of governance.

In many lands related to the large region of Central and Eastern Europe, the state – interrupted by World War One – tended to act in a rather minimalist manner until well into the interwar period with regard to questions concerning the regulation of labour and social policy, or at least the implementation of such regulations in actual labour and social policy practice (e.g. Grama 2020). This was due to the combination of political dedication to economic liberalism and the de facto disintegrative economic development that characterized the era, notwithstanding selective state measures to promote economic development or increase state revenues. This overall pattern resulted in massive social marginalization for large segments of the population, unstable working conditions, and few opportunities to successfully demand the expansion of formal rights or compliance with rights that existed on paper (Bader-Zaar and Zimmermann [forthcoming](#); Berend and Ránki 1974; Grama 2018; Kochanowicz and Bogdan 2017; Müller 2021; Tomka 2013).

Some of the repercussions of these patterns of socioeconomic and political development for the shape of women's labour activism are addressed in the articles. Illustrating women's activism around home front welfare issues in wartime economies, Eszter Varsa places centre stage a series of direct and unmediated confrontations in

Hungary during the second half of World War One, specifically between crowds dominated by women belonging to the agrarian population and local actors held responsible for mostly food- and provision-related matters. Varsa shows precisely at whom, namely local authorities, merchants, well-to-do peasants, “the rich,” and “the rulers” in general, the riots were directed and what concrete issues – including the lack of food, inadequate food distribution efforts, poor quality food, expensive food, or the war as such – were addressed. In response, local authorities, often mobilizing far-reaching powers conferred on them within the strictly centralized wartime regime, displayed a distinct mixture of pacification and repression. Alexandra Ghiț’s contribution on trade unionism in the Bucharest “Belvedere” tobacco factory shows how women’s labour organizing in a state-owned enterprise was strongly shaped by a legal framework developed in the early 1920s in reaction to a short-lived general strike in 1920 that had curtailed labour organizing. Ivelina Masheva’s contribution follows continuities and change in the gendered struggle for shorter working hours in Bulgaria, showcasing the variety of repertoires through which working-time limits were negotiated in specific contexts, such as the social radicalization towards the end of World War One that had enabled the adoption of the eight-hour workday, followed by the conservative backlash in the 1920s, which made its application extremely problematic.

Other countries, especially those that did not enjoy independent statehood or far-reaching state autonomy until the historical turning point of 1918/1919, experienced a strong emphasis on the expansion of labour and social governance as a means of stabilizing and strengthening newly gained state autonomy in the interwar period. This involved both national legislation and the entry into or adaptation to international norms, especially the ratification and implementation of ILO standards and the approximation of national legislation to such norms (Inglot 2008; Stegmann 2017). Women activists with an interest in improving the work and life circumstances of women and their communities aimed to take advantage of this expansion of labour governance to assert these interests. Zhanna Popova’s contribution on women labour inspectors in interwar Poland examines the opportunities this select group of women were afforded through their involvement in the labour governance of the newly independent state and the challenges they faced as a result. In practical terms, these women labour inspectors occupied ambivalent positions as they were both part of the government structures *and* critics of governmental policies and the degree to which labour law was implemented. Their professional activities faced many practical limitations that were common to all labour inspectors – non-compliance of employers and workers, the inability to perform enough factory visits, etc.—as well as specific to those who were focused on the labour of women and minors. Confronted with the subordinate position of women and minors in society and on the labour market, women labour inspectors came to expand their efforts beyond narrowly defined inspectorial work. Popova’s findings are complemented by Ivelina Masheva’s contribution, which shows how, in the vastly different context of interwar Bulgaria, the Labour Inspectorate played a prominent role in managing working hours in the textile industry. Masheva showcases the persistence of retrograde practices of regulating and managing women’s work despite the presence of (relatively) progressive labour laws.

In authoritarian-conservative systems, the rise of which characterized the 1930s (they had begun to emerge in some countries already in the late 1920s), increased state and

corporate interference in regulating and directing the “representation” of workers’ agendas became evident. This occurred, for example, through the creation, expansion, or transformation of institutions over which the state and employers had strong influence. Examples include the new state-bound trade unions or the new political emphasis on such “unions”; the introduction, restructuring, and strengthening of corporatist governance instruments; and new regulations in labour law, including, e.g. the conclusion of nationwide collective agreements or the introduction of minimum wages (Botz 2017; Bódy 2009; Petrungraro 2017; Pinto 2014). In turn, politically leftist organizations faced increasing pressure or were banned altogether. Under the impact of these developments, the repertoires and agendas of labour activists changed in a pronounced manner. In particular, anti-institutional militant and underground activism, often communist in character, gained ground (frequently despite heavy repression), and more moderate left-wing activists developed alternative forms of self-organization and engagement with the new governance structures. These included, as Alexandra Ghiț notes, the election of the protagonist of her article as a workers’ representative in the Bucharest Chamber of Labour, a corporatist-style institution on the social democratic list, in 1933. Or, as discussed in Ivelina Masheva’s contribution, in Bulgaria in the mid and late 1930s, petitions and complaints were used as alternative strategies when strikes and other more militant forms of activism were proscribed.

In hindsight, at least some of the changes in terms of governance experienced in some lands in the region starting in the 1920s and elsewhere in the 1930s can be captured as elements of long-term governance transformation. The state-socialist system that emerged starting in the 1940s in Central and Eastern Europe, with its “developmental state” that aimed to facilitate economic catch-up policies, can be described “as a kind of climax of the Eastern European state” (Brunnbauer 2022; see also Chase-Dunn 1980). Already the transition period in the later 1940s witnessed the adoption of many elements of labour policy from the Soviet Union. Among other things, these were aimed at putting the labour force into the service of the “building of socialism,” including a steadily increasing number and proportion of women. At the same time, the period also saw local policy innovation and more-or-less open integration and curiosity about non-communist labour policy, especially in the mid-1940s. Communist-controlled unions soon acquired the dual role of supporting and enforcing the mobilization of labour for the new system, while at the same time monitoring compliance with labour protection measures and advocating for the specific interests of the labour force. Research on the labour struggles of women involved in various capacities in this new system of governance has only begun. Susan Zimmermann’s contribution – although primarily focused on questions concerning the politics of scale – shows how, in Hungary during the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the very role attributed to unions in the economic “building of socialism” at and through the workplace opened up spaces of opportunity for women trade unionists to work towards the practical implementation of some elements of the socialist program of women’s emancipation to which the new “worker’s state” was committed in principle. The article also shows, however, that within state-socialist governance in Hungary during the transition to and during early state socialism, women trade unionists were and remained actors who could exert little visible influence on top-down decisions by party and trade union leadership. They also faced passive and active resistance from working women, who for various reasons were not at ease with the

confluence of the imposition of some of the economic burdens of “building of socialism” on their shoulders and the promise of (socialist) women’s emancipation, embodied by the politics of women trade unionists.

Veronika Helfert’s contribution shows that the close connection of women trade unionists with state-centred governance was not an isolated specificity of the Central and Eastern European world of state socialism, even when the pronounced differences between the political constitution of Austria and the state-socialist countries are carefully considered. Against the background of the trend towards more inclusive social and economic policies facilitated by a strong state, which could also be observed in Austria between the 1950s and 1980s, Austrian women trade unionists tenaciously defended the model of full-time work for women as the basis of women’s emancipation and tried to counteract any negative repercussions of part-time work for women in the world of work. Helfert discusses how labour women and women bureaucrats acted on various levels of and aimed to impact labour governance. Her article explores how organized trade union activism translated into legislation within the Austrian corporatist state and the institutions of Social Partnership. Additionally, women civil servants within the Ministry of Social Affairs, specifically those who promoted the study of the subject of part-time work and circulated the international expertise acquired through and for participation in inter-state organizational meetings to national lawmakers and labour activists, played a somewhat hidden but nonetheless important role.

Alexandra Ghiț’s contribution, although not addressing the post-1945 period, invites further thinking about long-term trends, as well as continuity and change between social democratic activism within a state-owned factory in interwar Romania and women’s labour activism within the state-owned sector of the national economy in the post-1945 period. This interwar social democratic trade unionism was sometimes well-aligned with government priorities concerning the factory. At times, the women protagonists of such activism could make use of these priorities to advance certain interests of women workers, while other interests simply could not be accommodated.

Scale

During the twentieth century, labour activism and labour politics in Central and Eastern Europe were – to various degrees – embedded in and contributed to transnational and international actions that shaped the politics of women’s work. Women activists, functionaries, and professionals from the region who sought to represent the interests of working women acted at multiple scales. These included the international arena, where social movement and inter-state internationalisms – some global, other regional in scope, and many of them imbued and/or struggling with regional disparities and global inequalities – collaborated and competed; post/imperial frameworks of various scopes, often characterized by similar tensions, and, e.g. legal pluralism, shifting borders, and multiple and overlapping political and cultural belongings; the national level; and the local sphere. From the long-term perspective, the networks of interaction across and along the different scales of action thus captured tended to address an increasing number of issues, and in some cases, they became more densely knit. Women labour activists, functionaries, and professionals from the region repeatedly chose (or hoped) to use activity at international, transnational, and transregional scales to promote their agendas. At the same time, many

remained or became sceptical towards, or entertained a limited interest in, international engagement. Many factors must be considered, which together can explain such hesitation. These included the limited material and cultural (e.g. language) resources to “go transnational” possessed by women from working-class backgrounds; the experience of marginalization on the international stage; the limited use workplace activists could make of international norms in their daily action “back home,” and their pronounced interest, e.g. as trade unionists, in practical and often workplace- and community-related action (i.e. rather than engaging in protracted processes involving multi-level governance).

Still, women labour activists, functionaries, and professionals from the region conceived of their realm of action as open and variably construed, aiming to exploit the opportunities provided by multi-level engagement. When studying the history of their activism, we need to avoid the reification of and an overemphasis on the transnational and international as the focal point of their action (Dietze and Naumann 2018, esp. 419) while, at the same time, unearthing the greatly understudied involvement of (some of) these women in cross- and transregional transnational and international politics and action.

A full and long-term history of labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century must address several overarching key questions regarding the politics of scale. What was the contribution of actors and organizations from the region to the evolving agendas and repertoires of women’s international labour activism and the international politics of women’s work? How were women from the region and their sometimes region-specific concerns positioned in the world of women’s, labour, and inter-state internationalisms involved in the politics of women’s work? How did women actors within the region invent, negotiate, and adapt repertoires of action and political agendas that travelled to and within the region along and across scales?

There is little research addressing the presence and agendas of Central and Eastern European women in international organizations concerned with the politics of women’s work. Still, it might be tentatively claimed that well into the interwar period, women from the region and their region-specific concerns and agendas were represented in Western-leaning labour internationalisms to a limited degree. Austrian women were fully present in the international socialist networks of labour women, and women’s Catholic trade union internationalism stretched more visibly into East-Central and Eastern Europe as compared to these socialist networks (Neunsinger 2007; Zimmermann 2021). Jelena Tešija’s article demonstrates that the same was true for women’s co-operativism. Arguably, as a result of its focus on the practical co-operative rebuilding of society, which was already underway in the young Soviet Union – and a number of other factors – the International Co-operative Women’s Guild’s (ICWG) included a Soviet branch that was closely involved in government policies back home in the Soviet Union. The ICWG systematically collected and presented data on the reality of women’s unpaid labour in the household and community, including in village communities, and the efforts of its national branches to ease the burden. Importantly, the ICWG pursued a deliberate policy of opening space on the international plane for the discussion and presentation of various positions and the solutions advocated and attempted in different places and contexts. Taken together, this strategy offered unique opportunities for Central and Eastern European branches to present region-specific problems and examples.

From the early 1930s onwards, women from the region – and some of their agendas – began to play a more visible role also in other internationalisms concerned with women's work, as has been documented so far for the ILO and socialist women's organizations. These women played an important part in alerting international circles to the dangers of authoritarianism for women's status in the world of work (Ghiț 2021; Zimmermann 2021; see also Kimble 2023, 1941–1947). Discussing Polish labour inspectors' transnational research and publications in multiple languages, as well as their participation in the ILO's initiatives, Zhanna Popova's article contributes to this new scholarship. Women labour inspectors combined their duties and initiatives at the level of the shop floor with national agendas and transnational engagement. Some of these activities revolved around interpretations of the national legislation, which – strongly inspired by the labour standards set by the ILO – regulated the labour relations of women and minors. At the same time, Halina Krahelska, a left-wing activist and labour inspector discussed in Popova's contribution, maintained a strong critique of the limitations of international labour governance as she experienced the massive gap between legal commitments and the reality on the shop floor.

The contribution by Ivelina Masheva similarly brings together the discussion of various scales of activism, in this case through the lens of the struggles around the eight-hour day in Bulgaria from the 1890s to the 1930s. Masheva explores the entanglement of how working time limits were negotiated on the shop floor, in national politics, and with reference to international norms, examining the gendered character of left-wing, expert, and right-wing debate and action related to shorter working hours, overwork, and labour protections. Masheva argues that the struggles around the application of the eight-hour day in the Bulgarian textile industry were significantly shaped by the fact that the industry employed high proportions of women and underage workers, which, together with other characteristics (including migration and factory housing), made workers particularly vulnerable to labour rights violations. The synchronicity of the process leading up to the adoption of the eight-hour workday in national legislation and as an international labour standard has been identified in relation to both Western and Eastern European countries (Cross 1985; Stegmann 2020). Yet Masheva goes further, highlighting the multi-scale and entangled character of the struggles to enforce it. In the early 1930s, an unsuccessful strike in a large hub of the Bulgarian textile industry provoked a trade union survey on working hours in local factories. This triggered nationwide conflict, and, in the end, Bulgarian trade unionists managed to draw international attention to the conflict at the ILO's annual meeting in Geneva. Masheva's contribution thus shows how working-time regulations and practices were negotiated through a multi-scale social process that can be captured only when considering together social struggle, the adoption of legislation, and the tensions around its enforcement.

Following the political life trajectory of one activist in Romania from 1904 to 1944, Alexandra Ghiț documents a case of multi-scale politics which de facto bypassed the transnational and international realm. At the "Belvedere" cigarette factory in Bucharest, Paraschiva B. Ion was the leader of several iterations of a social democratic trade union who participated in the negotiations over a collective labour contract between 1928 and 1933, building trust but also defusing discontent in the factory. "Local" trade unionism in Bucharest very easily "jumped scales," gaining national importance, especially in a country as centralized and capital-city-driven as Romania was during the period. This was the case

with the struggles against “sacrifice curbs” (wage cuts) in the 1930s, the conflict over which travelled from the Belvedere to other tobacco factories around the country. Whereas there were several other women labour activists involved in trade union politics at the local level, Ion was one of just a handful of women from the manufacturing sector who were highly active and visible on the national level as well, performing several trade union functions and participating in nation-wide actions. Arguably, Ion’s national “career” had to do with the centrality of the state-owned Belvedere factory, where she organized for a successful social-democratic trade union that was attempting to include more women workers in its structures, from the late 1920s onwards. Ion also partook in the more systematized sharing of knowledge across scales – in her case, the local and national scales – about women’s labour relations and conditions, a tendency that could be witnessed all over Europe during the interwar period. Ghiț’s article also discusses the source-related difficulties for creating a full, critical biography of this controversial trade unionist. By contrast, as a trade unionist rather than a party woman, Ion did not participate in the socialist women’s international network, focusing instead on the development of national-level sectoral expertise in tobacco women’s work.

Returning to the international arena, with the advent of the Soviet Union and later on the state-socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe, communist-led activism with a focus on women’s work and labour in the context of “building socialism” had a principal counterpart in relevant communist-led international organizations, i.e. the Comintern and the Profintern in the interwar period, and the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in the post-1945 decades. The connections between women activists and functionaries from the region and these international organizations and their networks, as well as the transnational networks of communist-oriented women from the region, constitute an important, highly region-specific subject in the history of women’s labour activism (e.g. Bosomitu and Luciana 2023; Dyakonova 2023, *forthcoming*; Stanczak-Wislicz 2023). Susan Zimmermann discusses the relationship between Hungarian women trade unionists and the women’s politics of the WFTU, on the one hand, and the role of women from the state-socialist countries in the WFTU, on the other, during the early post-war decades, focusing on the politics of promoting women’s trade unionism. During this period and in the ensuing decades, the WFTU vigorously advocated for an egalitarian agenda related to the politics of women’s (full-time) work in Western-dominated institutions of international governance, i.e. the ILO and the UN (see also Zimmermann 2023). In terms of promoting women’s trade unionism, an international policy the WFTU developed starting from the middle of the 1950s onwards; the organization similarly focused heavily on the Western world and the Global South. On the WFTU’s international stage, state-socialist Eastern Europe served as a role model for what could and should be achieved in other world regions. In turn, women trade unionists from the region, while fully present in the WFTU, experienced limited opportunities to use the international stage provided by the organization to support their daily struggles around the mobilization of women into trade union work. Combining a focus on the Hungarian workplace and national trade union policies within the country with a focus on the WFTU, Zimmermann finds that there was asynchronicity and limited travel across scales of agendas related to the promotion of women’s trade unionism.

Veronika Helfert offers a parallel multi-scale analysis of how part-time work in the neighbouring country of Austria, which was aligned with the Western world, became a standardized and codified employment model. Spanning the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, Helfert shows how developments in Western countries and international policy debates, namely within the ILO and the International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICFTU), triggered policy engagement with the issue on a national level. In Austria, women labour activists from the Christian-social trade union faction used their position within the corporatist Austrian state as well as their labour movement channels to push for legislation on part-time work. Social democratic women, by contrast and in tune with the position of many left-wing women trade unionists across the Cold War divide, took a more cautious stance in national as well as international (i.e. ILO and ICFTU) contexts. Helfert also examines for which strata of women, and under which circumstances, part-time work offered an attractive alternative employment model and how this is reflected in the activities of trade union women representing diverse occupational fields.

Perspectives

Taken together, the articles presented in the following highlight, through their focus on the involvement of women's labour struggles with the politics of scale and with multi-level governance, the co-constitutive role of the local, regional, and transnational politics of labour and gender in shaping women's labour activism in the region. The contributions also highlight the role activists, functionaries, and professionals from the region played in the making and shaping of the gendered politics of women's work, from the local all the way up to the transnational arenas.

In addition, the articles, and the larger research on which they build, alert us to specifically understudied subjects and questions of key importance as we move forward on the path to a long-term, transregional, integrative, and critical history of women's labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe and transnationally. Alongside their focus on issues of governance and scale, the articles also contribute to the study of some of these themes.

Undoubtedly, the involvement of women's labour activism with agrarian worlds of labour, ethnic diversity, and migrant labour constitute particularly understudied subjects. In these and other research fields, it is important to look in tandem at diverse ideological affiliations, including social democratic, communist, and confessional varieties. We are only beginning to understand how the historical competition between these worldviews influenced the long-term development of the agendas pursued by each "camp." Keen attention must be paid to women's multiple engagements not only across but also along scales, including, e.g. the networks of women involved in more than one pillar of the social democratic labour movement or communist internationalism, and the history of individual women's parallel, multiple engagements in several movement pillars. We need more research on the engagement of grassroots activists and networkers, politically committed and organized women, and women experts, professionals, and civil servants with the gendered world of work before we can systematically and comparatively evaluate the changing role and impact of the activism of these highly variegated groups.

More careful examination is necessary to understand whether and how women's more limited (though, from the long-term perspective, increasing) involvement with systems of governance translated into gendered patterns and perhaps specific continuities in women's labour struggles. Such gendered patterns included, e.g. the stigmatization of women's activist behaviour as inappropriate for women or as transgressing gendered respectability norms, and various forms of women's direct engagement with private and state employers, aspects of which are addressed in the contributions by Eszter Varsa and Alexandra Ghiț. The history of the many women involved in rather constraining forms of governance while also pursuing transgressive activist agendas needs to be studied critically and systematically in ways that ask, once again, how women's unequal status within both governance structures and the gendered world of work may have contributed to this phenomenon.

In studying this and other subjects, we need to pay special attention to why and how activist women and professionals developed a strong focus on knowledge production and how they used specialist knowledge and gendered "channels" of knowledge production and dissemination as they aimed to exert influence on women's gendered status in labour governance and work and labour struggles. Susan Zimmermann's contribution points to women trade unionists' effort to educate the communist-led World Federation of Trade Unions on specific measures aimed at overcoming the gender-specific obstacles to women's active contribution to trade union life; this combined with the limited "trade value" of knowledge on old and new measures surveyed in state-socialist Europe. As Zhanna Popova demonstrates in her article, knowledge production could also form part of the activist agenda of state employees. Labour inspectors researched the workplace conditions of women workers and minors and not only exposed the exploitative and marginalizing arrangements in their reports and other publications for professionals but, addressing wider audiences, also sought to build a compelling case for the need to protect these vulnerable workers. Eszter Varsa's article, discussing women's practices of rumour-spreading during spontaneous local labour unrest, directs our attention to a completely different historical setting. Varsa moves beyond culturally essentialising interpretations of this form of women's gendered ways of producing and utilizing knowledge. Rather than conceiving of these practices as misrepresentations of local realities by ignorant, gossipy women, Varsa captures them as a means by which women attempted to take control of the situation and pressure representatives of the state to take their demands in consideration.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our reviewer for their valuable comments, which pointed us to the additional interpretative potential contained in the original version of this introduction and the individual articles, and our native speaker corrector Emily Gioielli for her amazing work on this introduction and the seven articles.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Note: This work has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Advanced Grant ZARAH, Grant agreement No. 833691, 2020–2025).

References

- Bader-Zaar, B., and S. Zimmermann. "Accepted for publication. "The Politics of Social and Political Inclusion and Exclusion 1880–1914." In *The Cambridge History of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1790–1918*, edited by P. Judson and M. Cornwall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bantman, C., and B. Altena. 2015. *Reassessing the Transnational Turn: Scales of Analysis in Anarchist and Syndicalist Studies*. Milton Park, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315757315>.
- Berend, T. I., and G. Ránki. 1974. *Economic Development in East-Central Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bereni, L., and A. Revillard. 2018. "Movement Institutions: The Bureaucratic Sources of Feminist Protest." *Politics & Gender* 14 (3): 407–432. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18000399>.
- Bódy, Zs. 2009. "A Delay in the Emancipation of Labour: Bourgeois Paternalism, Workers' Insurance and Labour Law in Hungary from the End of the Nineteenth Century to the Second World War." *Social History* 34 (2): 204–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020902879630>.
- Bosomitu, S., and J. Luciana. 2023. "Ana Pauker (1893–1960): The Infamous Romanian Woman Communist Leader." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists Around the World*, edited by F. de Haan, 141–166. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13127-1_6.
- Botz, G. 2017. "'Corporatist State' and Enhanced Authoritarian Dictatorship: The Austria of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg (1933–38)." In *Corporatism and Fascism: The Corporatist Wave in Europe*, 144–173. London: Routledge.
- Brunnbauer, U. 2022. "How and Where Do We Write the History of State Socialism? Some Preliminary Reflections." In *Everyday Socialism: Promises, Realities, and Strategies*, edited by A. Luleva, I. Petrova, P. Petrov, S. Kazalarska, Z. Bogadnova, and Y. Yancheva, 7–25. Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov Publishing House of Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.
- Çağatay, S., M. Erdélyi, A. Ghiț, O. Gnydiuk, V. Helfert, I. Masheva, Z. Popova, J. Tešija, E. Varsa, and S. Zimmermann. *Forthcoming*. "Introduction: Women's Labour Struggles in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond: Toward a Long-Term, Transregional, Integrative, and Critical Approach." In *Through the Prism of Gender and Work: Women's Labour Struggles in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond, 19th and 20th Centuries*, edited by S. Çağatay, A. Ghiț, O. Gnydiuk, V. Helfert, I. Masheva, Z. Popova, J. Tešija, E. Varsa, and S. Zimmermann, in print preparation. Leiden: Brill.
- Caglar, G., E. Prügl, and S. Zwingel, eds. 2013. *Feminist Strategies in International Governance*. London: Routledge.
- Chase-Dunn, C. K. 1980. "Socialist States in the Capitalist World Economy." *Social Problems* 27 (5): 505–525. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800193>.
- Cross, G. 1985. "Les Trois Huit: Labor Movements, International Reform, and the Origins of the Eight-Hour Day, 1919–1924." *French Historical Studies* 14 (2): 240–268. <https://doi.org/10.2307/286584>.
- Dietze, A., and K. Naumann. 2018. "Revisiting Transnational Actors from a Spatial Perspective." *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 25 (3–4): 415–430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2018.1439892>.
- Dyakovna, D. 2023. "'Through the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in All Countries, Onward to the Complete Emancipation of Women!': The Transnational Networks of the Communist Women's Movement in the Early 1920s." *Journal of Women's History* 35 (1): 11–33. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2023.0001>.
- Dyakovna, D. *Forthcoming*. "'Approached as a Force for Labour': Communist Women's Fight for Women Workers' Rights in the Comintern, the Profintern, and Eastern Europe in the 1920s." In *Through the Prism of Gender and Work: Women's Labour Struggles in Central and Eastern Europe*

- and Beyond, 19th and 20th Centuries*, edited by S. Çağatay, A. Ghiț, O. Gnydiuk, V. Helfert, I. Masheva, Z. Popova, J. Tešija, E. Varsa, and S. Zimmermann, in print preparation. Leiden: Brill.
- Franzaway, S., and M. Fonow. 2011. *Making Feminist Politics: Transnational Alliances Between Women and Labor*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Ghiț, A. 2021. *Solidarity and Inequality: European Socialist Women's International Organizing in the Interwar Period*. ZARAH Blog Entry. <https://zarah-ceu.org/solidarity-and-inequality-european-socialist-womens-international-organizing-in-the-interwar-period/>.
- Grama, A. 2018. *Laboring Along: Industrial Workers and the Making of Postwar Romania*. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110605167>.
- Grama, A. 2020. "The Cost of Juridification: Lineages of Cheap Labor in Twentieth-Century Romania." *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 17 (3): 30–52. <https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-8349344>.
- Inglot, T. 2008. *Welfare States in East Central Europe, 1919–2004*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kekk, M. E., and K. Sikkink, eds. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kimble, S. 2023. "Internationalist Women Against Nazi Atrocities in Occupied Europe 1941–1947." *Journal of Women's History* 35 (1): 57–79. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2023.0003>.
- Kochanowicz, J., and M. Bogdan. 2017. "Rural and Urban Worlds: Between Economic Modernization and Persistent Backwardness." In *The Routledge History of East Central Europe Since 1700*, edited by A. von Klimo and I. Livezeanu, 81–125. Milton Park, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315230894-3>.
- Müller, U. 2021. "Eastern Europe in the Wheat Crises of Globalization and Deglobalization (1870–1939)." In *Transregional Connections in the History of East Central Europe*, edited by K. Castryck-Naumann, 37–83. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110680515-002>.
- Neunsinger, S. 2007. "Creating the International Spirit of Socialist Women: Women in the Labour and Socialist International 1923–1939." In *Crossing Boundaries: Women's Organizing in Europe and the Americas, 1880–1940s*, edited by P. Jonsson, S. Neunsinger, and J. Sangster, 117–156. Uppsala: University of Uppsala Press.
- Petrungaro, S. 2017. "Inter-War Yugoslavia Seen Through Corporatist Glasses." In *Corporatism and Fascism: The Corporatist Wave in Europe*, edited by A. C. Pinto, 236–256. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315388908-11>.
- Pinto, A. C. 2014. "Fascism, Corporatism and the Crafting of Authoritarian Institutions in Inter-War European Dictatorships." In *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe*, edited by A. C. Pinto and A. Kallis, 87–117. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137384416_5.
- Shin, K.-Y. 2016. "Governance." In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by L. Disch and M. Hawkesworth, 304–325. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.16>.
- Soule, S. A., and C. Roggebrand. 2019. "Diffusion Processes within and Across Movements." In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Social and Political Movements*, edited by D. A. Snow, S. H. Soule, H. Kriesi, and H. J. McCammon, 236–251. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119168577.ch13>.
- Stanczak-Wislicz, K. 2023. "Edwarda Orłowska (1906–1977): A Story of Communist Activism in Poland Told in Words and Silences." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists Around the World*, edited by F. de Haan, 217–243. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13127-1_9.
- Stegmann, N. 2017. "The Work of the ILO and East Central Europe: Insights into the Early Polish and Czechoslovak Interwar Years." *Acta Universitatis Carolinae—Studia Territoria* 1 (17): 11–34. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363231.2017.16>.
- Stegmann, N. 2020. "Poland and the Versailles Order: Intersections of Transnational, International and National Actions in Social Politics." In *Rozpad imperiów: Kształowanie powojennego ładu w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1918–1923*, edited by M. Gibiec, G. Hryciuk, and R. Klementowski, 286–302. Wrocław: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej.
- Storrs, L. R. Y. 2000. *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

- Tomka, B. 2013. *A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Wilhoit, M. E. 2017. "EnGendering the State: Women's Work and Peru's 2012 Agrarian Census." *Anthropology of Work Review* 38 (2): 67–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/awr.12119>.
- Zimmermann, S. 2021. *Frauenpolitik und Männergewerkschaft: Die IGB-Fraueninternationale und die internationale Geschlechterpolitik der Zwischenkriegszeit*. Vienna: Löcker Verlag.
- Zimmermann, S. 2023. "Shifting the Scene: The Changing Politics of Women's Work and the Making of Extended Childcare Leave in State-Socialist Hungary, Europe, and Internationally." In *Life Course, Work and Labour: Historical, Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by J. Ehmer and C. Lentz, 225–257. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Alexandra Ghiț, Veronika Helfert, Zhanna Popova, Jelena Tešija and Eszter Varsa
*Department of Gender Studies, Department of History, Central European University,
Vienna, Austria*

Ivelina Masheva
*Department of Gender Studies, Department of History, Central European University,
Vienna, Austria; Department of Modern Bulgarian History, Institute for Historical
Studies—Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria*

Susan Zimmermann
*Department of Gender Studies, Department of History, Central European University,
Vienna, Austria*

 zimmerma@ceu.edu