



# It's all about Cinderella – and the Prince?: Women's NGOs in Bulgaria

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*The fall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 generated fundamental political and socio-economic transformations. The introduction of the free-market economy in the region led to the closure or privatization of state corporations and, consequently, to an increase of the unemployment rate, while reductions of state funding for social services resulted in the erosion of former securities. Simultaneously, Western and international agencies and organisations have transferred billions of US dollars of financial aid into the region. Among the receivers of Western funding were Eastern European non-governmental organisations (NGOs) aiming to support local women through the transformations and to advocate their rights. Several authors, however, have pointed out that many of them pursue what they and/or their Western donors think is best for women rather than focusing on what women themselves consider their needs and wishes. This paper critically reviews two Bulgarian women's NGOs, including a discussion of their representations of women, the influence of Western donors, and the issue of who benefits from the NGOs' work. I argue that both NGOs, although they claim to advocate equal opportunities for women and men, pursue a 'women-only' approach by ignoring gender relations – an issue that is also largely overlooked by the critics presented in this paper. I conclude that NGOs, if they want to assist and support local women, ought to implement a 'women-and-men-together' approach, consider what women themselves view as their needs, and challenge neoliberalism.*

## Introduction

### *Eastern European Cinderella*

The fall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 generated fundamental political and socio-economic transformations. The introduction of the free-market economy in the region led to the closure or privatization of state corporations and, consequently, to an increase of the unemployment rate. Furthermore, reductions of state funding for social services resulted in the dismantling of social safety nets and the erosion of former securities. Simultaneously, U.S., Western European and international agencies and organisations, for example the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) or the World Bank, have transferred billions of US dollars of financial aid into the region (Ghodsee

2004, 729, 731). Among the receivers of Western funding were Eastern European non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focusing on women. These NGOs aim at supporting women through the economic transformations (ibid., 727) and at advocating their rights. Several authors, however, have pointed out that many of them pursue what they and/or their Western donors think is best for women rather than focussing on what women themselves consider their needs and desires (e.g., Berg 2004, 211f., 214; Ghodsee 2004, 737f.; 2005, 161ff.; Kay 2004, 250).

This paper will present a critical review of two Bulgarian women's NGOs, the Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation (GPF) and the Women's Alliance for Development (WAD). I will examine the NGOs' representations of women, the influence of Western donors, and

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the issue of who benefits from the NGOs' work. I argue that both NGOs, although they claim to advocate equal opportunities for women and men, pursue a 'women-only' approach by ignoring gender relations. This issue is also largely overlooked by the critics presented in this paper. I will finally discuss some suggestions for what NGOs ought to change if they really want to help local women.

### 'Equal opportunities for women and men':

#### *Two Bulgarian women's NGOs*

The Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation (GPF) and the Women's Alliance for Development (WAD) are nationally based NGOs implementing projects not only in the capital Sofia but also in other parts of the country (GPF 2006a, b; WAD 2006a, b). Both NGOs are linked with each other; for example, GPF is part of the national network of WAD (GPF 2006a). They further have worked together in a research project sponsored by the World Bank in which gender aspects of poverty and gender inequality in the family and the labour market were analyzed (WAD 2006c).

GPF was established in 1994 by a female electrical engineer with long-term experience in foreign trade (GPF 2006b, c). In 1996, WAD was founded by thirteen female NGO leaders to support Bulgarian grassroots organisations and to improve their networking (WAD 2006b). The team of the GPF mainly consists of university educated women (GPF 2006c). WAD's current Board members similarly include well-educated women and two men (WAD 2006d). Both NGOs have user-friendly, professional looking websites in Bulgarian and English.<sup>1</sup> They have also produced several publications, including documentaries in the case of GPF.

Furthermore, various terms they utilize on their websites such as 'gender equality', 'civil society', 'capacity building', or 'democratic, sustainable development' demonstrate familiarity with the Western development literature and the knowledge of how to use of 'right' buzzwords that funding agencies like to

hear (cf. Pinnock 2002, 238, 244). I will return to this issue later in the paper. According to its mission, GPF aims to:

[w]ork on achieving and guaranteeing *equal opportunities of women and men* to express themselves *in all spheres of personal and public life* through ensuring equal access to all resources of society (2006a; emphasis added).

WAD, similarly, considers its mission "to establish a strategic alliance of organizations and individuals, *working for equal opportunities of women and men in all spheres of live* [sic]" (2006a; emphasis added).

GPF and WAD both address the following issues, although with different emphasis: raising awareness for gender and gender equality issues, advocacy for the incorporation of women in decision-making processes (women in politics), and women and economy. WAD, in contrast to GPF, states these issues only in its aims and projects, not in the form of a long-term program (GPF 2006a; WAD 2006a). Both NGOs further propose to adapt foreign practices and know-how to the Bulgarian context. WAD, however, explicitly claims to transfer Western know-how (2006a), while GPF only states to incorporate practices of foreign NGOs, which can include those of non-Western NGOs (2006a).

GPF, in contrast to WAD, focuses on violence against women and domestic abuse against women and children. It is also concerned with the media, particularly gender stereotypes and how they can be overcome in partnership with the media (GPF 2006b, d). The issue of 'violence' is explicitly addressed in two WAD projects, however not domestic violence against women but trafficking of women and children as well as child prostitution (WAD 2006e, f, g). WAD focuses in several projects on women and politics, especially on the participation of women in politics and of women-voters in elections (WAD 2006e).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> GPF: [www.gender-bg.org](http://www.gender-bg.org); WAD: [www.women-bg.org](http://www.women-bg.org).

<sup>2</sup> For more details on GPF's and WAD's programs and projects see their websites: [www.gender-bg.org](http://www.gender-bg.org) (GPF) and [www.women-bg.org](http://www.women-bg.org) (WAD).

Both NGOs use similar strategies to fulfill their missions and realize their aims: information and education (WAD, for example, through the print media and internet), training (GPF, for example, by holding seminars), researching, and networking (GPF 2006a, b, e; WAD 2006a). WAD's strategies further include, but are not limited to, consulting on funding access and providing 'gender expertise', which is, unfortunately, not further explained on the website (WAD 2006a).

GPF and WAD are both mainly sponsored by Western organisations and institutions. The donors of GPF include The Global Fund for Women, UNIFEM, Mama Cash from the Netherlands, and the Council of Europe (GPF 2006f). Among WAD's sponsors are The Global Fund for Women, UNIFEM, USAID, the European Commission, and OXFAM NOVIB from the Netherlands (WAD 2006h). Only a very small amount of WAD's income is generated independently from its Western sponsors, for example, through membership fees, subscriptions to the monthly bulletin, or trainings sessions (WAD 2002, 15; 2003, 13). Income numbers for GPF were unavailable at the time of publication.

#### 'Women as passive victims of transition':

##### *Critiques of women's NGOs*

Local and international NGOs working in Eastern Europe, including those focussing on women and gender issues, have been criticised by anthropologists (e.g., Hemment 2004a, b; Phillips 2005) and scholars from related disciplines (e.g., Berg 2004; Ghodsee 2004, 2005; Ishkanian 2004). The first critique is related to the issue of feminism. According to Kristen Ghodsee, a particular type of Western cultural feminism was exported to Eastern Europe through international aid agencies and Western feminist organisations, informing the activities of many local NGOs (2004, 728, 733f.). Cultural feminists of this type prioritize gender in contrast to other factors such as class and ethnicity. They present the difference of women and men in an essentialising way and they view women as a group of oppressed subjects – an experience they supposedly share

regardless of class, age, or ethnicity (ibid., 728, 732f.).

The two Bulgarian NGOs do not explicitly state that they are 'feminist', possibly because feminism is often negatively viewed by Eastern Europeans as, for example, alien Western ideology, anti-male and anti-family, and something pursued by privileged women (Ghodsee 2004, 728, 733; Ishkanian 2004, 270; Kay 2004, 244; Sundstrom 2002, 216). Nonetheless, I propose that the NGOs' emphasis on gender, less on class or ethnicity, as differentiating factor and their presentation of women as mainly disadvantaged group could be informed by cultural feminism.

Western feminists have been criticised in the past for their representations of Third World women as a vulnerable and oppressed group (e.g., Mohanty 1991). Similarly, women in postsocialist Eastern Europe were considered by NGOs and donor organisations as vulnerable and as victims of the 'transition'<sup>3</sup> who are more negatively affected by the transformations than men (Ghodsee 2004, 734f.; 2005, 163). Bulgarian women's NGOs ignore in their presentation of the negative effects of the transformations those women who are relatively successful after the fall of communism, for example, women working in the tourism sector (Ghodsee 2004, 736; 2005, 7, 155, 166f.).

GPF and WAD present women in an essentialising way as a group and largely ignore differences. I propose that the main differences among the group 'women' are the following: ethnicity, that means Bulgarian and Roma women (GPF 2006g; WAD and ASA 2003, 19); women who are active in politics and those who are not; and differences according to age,

<sup>3</sup> The notion of transition is widely criticised (e.g., Berdahl 2000; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Pine and Bridger 1998; Verdery 1996; cf. Phillips 2005, 253) because it implies a linear progression between two fixed position or stages, from socialism to capitalism and democracy or from plan economy to market economy. While proponents of the concepts have focussed on macro-politics and ignored micro-processes, scholars critical of the concept have emphasised the multiple trajectories and unintended consequences of the transformations and pointed out that regions are unevenly affected by the changes.

education, and economic situation mentioned in a report by WAD and the Agency for Social Analyses (ASA) (2003, 19, 22ff.) but not elaborated on the WAD's website. Successful women are not acknowledged on the websites of both NGOs; an exception is GPF's program *Women and Economy*. It targets businesswomen who want to export their products and expand their business (GPF 2006h, i), which implies that there are women who have been successfully manoeuvring through the transformations.

Especially illustrative is the listing in the WAD and ASA report of factors for men's success, for example, having experience, contacts, and better professional orientation, having accumulated their own capital, or being more willing to take risks (2003, 81). It continues to list factors for women's "relative unsuccess", for example, selling their labour at a lower price, accepting any job, or having not accumulated (non)financial capital at the time of privatization (ibid.). Factors for men's lack of success and women's success, however, are not mentioned, leaving the reader with the impression that women are more disadvantaged than men and that men are better prepared and more capable to manoeuvre in a capitalist environment (cf. Ghodsee 2005, 157). The latter seems contradictory to an earlier statement in the report claiming that the access to employment depends on factors such as age, education, residence, or computer skills and "hardly then on gender" (WAD and ASA 2003, 20).

I do not want to imply that Bulgarian women do not face discrimination based on their gender within the labour market. For example, employers preferred to hire men over women (Daskalova 2000, 340); especially young women are affected because they could become mothers and take leaves (WAD and ASA 2003, 11). Nevertheless, the presentation of women as a disadvantaged and more vulnerable group in opposition to men overlooks the fact that some women have been successful in postsocialist Bulgaria and have manoeuvred through the transformations while many men are negatively

affected by the economic changes (cf. Ghodsee 2004, 746; 2005, 4f., 158).

NGOs were further criticised for emphasising women's supposedly passive behaviour (cf. Berg 2004, 211). While, according to the WAD and ASA report, passivity and helplessness are predominate among the Bulgarian population in general (2003, 77), women are "comparatively more passive when choosing alternatives for improving their living status" (ibid., 78). They rely primarily on 'passive' strategies such as reducing their consumption and 'fastening the belts' (ibid., 77fn.38, 78). The report further distinguishes working from non-working women by claiming that the former choose rather 'active' coping strategies such as opening their own business or working in the informal economy to receive additional income (ibid.).

Another example for women's 'passivity' is the complaint that many women rely on the government and not on their own potential. They show 'nostalgia' for the guaranteed security under communism (WAD and ASA 2003, 62). Thus the report implies that many women 'cling' to their past habits, namely, viewing the government as responsible to provide employment and services instead of becoming active and adapting to the new circumstances (cf. Ghodsee 2003, 30; 2004, 747; 2005, 166). However, as Ghodsee points out, women's supposedly passive strategies and reliance on the government as well as their tendency to vote for leftist parties or the socialist party can be interpreted as resistance to the free-market system (2003, 30f.; 2004, 747; 2005, 41). The so-called basic needs such as health care, education, or basic food items were rights under the communist system provided by the state at no or low costs. Women might not have accepted that it is now considered primarily their responsibility to pay for these needs, for example, by starting a business when other forms of employment are lacking (Ghodsee 2003, 30; 2004, 747; 2005, 165f.).

In her discussion of women's informal networks in Uzbekistan, Andrea Berg argues that NGOs ignore such networks as a provision of financial and emotional support and

expression of women's (actual) needs (2004, 195, 197). Instead, the majority of NGO chairs

*stress their own activity as opposed to the inactivity of the target group ... Rather than relying on the strategies and ideas of their target group, the chairs monopolize the valuation of its needs and wants. Put bluntly, target groups are seen as objects of instruction ... The relation between NGOs and their target group is determined by a high degree of hierarchy. The target group is not included in decision making (ibid., 211f).*

GPF's report of the *Roma Can Do It* project (2006g) provides an excellent example for the representation of the target group, in this case Roma women, as passive and 'objects of instruction'. The report is especially interesting because it includes (1) a presentation of Roma women as a vulnerable group that has to be educated on issues of gender equality, including their own situation and their rights; (2) views of Roma women; (3) a reflection on the project; and (4) the 'frustration' of the project staff with the target group.<sup>4</sup>

The project was implemented in 2003 with the overall objective of political empowerment of Roma women and their involvement in a network of NGOs and political activists for gender equality (GPF 2006g, 1). The immediate and long term goals included, for example, increasing the awareness of Roma women on gender equality, raising their self-esteem, and enhancing their participation in politics, for example, as members, activists, and candidates of political parties (ibid.). Part of the project was a series of seven one-day seminars with two Roma women trainers to prepare female Roma political activists and officials (ibid., 2). In those seminars, 130 Roma women (21 of them were NGO members) and 23 men participated (ibid., 4). Unfortunately, the report does not provide explicit information if the participating Roma men were leaders and if the project coordinator was a Roma (cf. ibid., 10).

<sup>4</sup> Although not clearly stated, the report was probably written by the coordinator of the project (who was not or is currently not a member of the NGO) and the two Roma trainers (cf. GPF 2006k, 1).

In the report's conclusion and evaluation of the project, Roma women are presented as double 'victims': they are discriminated as an ethnic minority (Roma) and as women (GPF 2006g, 10). They are further portrayed as passive and subordinated:

Each generation reproduces the family/community pattern of *voluntary subordination* of women... Roma make a cult of her *passive and subordinate status*, which is highly praised in the Roma value and social system. Roma women are seen mainly in the role of *mothers, wives and housewives* (ibid.; original emphasis).

This statement illustrates the dismissal of the roles of mothers and housewives, if they are the 'only' roles Roma women fulfill. It implies that the role of paid workers is crucial in order to overcome subordination. However, the roles of mothers and housewives might be considered valuable by Roma women and men themselves. It is further not discussed if and how Roma women exercise power and if they want to maintain their roles. Moreover, the report includes a complaint that Roma women continue to be passive and that they were not willing to actively engage in the implementation of changes, even if they considered them as necessary (ibid., 11). The 'frustration' of the organizers, I propose, is especially illustrated by the following statement: "How could the Bulgarians believe in the Roma women's abilities, when the Roma people themselves are not well prepared for the challenges they face" (ibid.).

The report gives the impression that the situation of Roma women has to be changed – leaving aside a discussion if and how Roma women want a change. The 'outside' intervention by a non-Roma NGO is aimed at contributing to Roma women's empowerment by making them aware of their unequal status within the Roma society (GPF 2006g, 1). According to the report, the participants had started to change their views on their roles at the end of the seminar (ibid., 10). I do not argue that Roma women are not experiencing gender

and ethnicity based discrimination in Bulgaria (cf. Daskalova 2000, 347) and that they are not interested in changing their situation (cf. Pinnock 2002, 238). However, the portrayal of Roma women as mainly passive victims neglects their potentially diverse coping strategies. Furthermore, the implementation of a project by a non-Roma NGO, seemingly without consulting with Roma NGO leaders and without researching of Roma women's needs, is problematic (cf. GPF 2006g, 11, 15). Similarly to Pinnock (2002, 241), I argue that the project may target what the NGO considers as important not necessarily what Roma women view as their needs. According to Pinnock, Bulgarian NGOs started to include Roma in their projects, in many cases only superficially, because their Western donors funded such projects (ibid., 238f.). I will later return to the influence of Western sponsors on women's NGOs.

The report of the *Roma Can Do It* project interestingly includes participants' evaluation of the seminars. Most comments are appreciative, for example, that it was a very good, interesting, and useful seminar (GPF 2006g, 6ff.). However, one participant remarked that there should be "more statistics and more facts about Roma people's achievements (...) more discussions on specific issues and looking for concrete decisions" (ibid., 8). Other comments were that women should attend these seminars with their husbands (ibid.) and that "typical problems of Roma women: education, unemployment, drastic integration strategies" should be "more thoroughly" covered (ibid., 9).

The project report concludes with several recommendations for future activities (GPFg, 15). Two of them are especially interesting. The first suggestion is to work with "ordinary" Roma women, not specifying who these are, to identify "different Roma women groups and *their* needs and aspirations" (ibid.; emphasis added). The second proposal states that the "ethno-cultural specifics of the Roma women" should be studied (ibid.). I argue that these two issues rather have to be starting points for seminars and activities. It is critical to assess Roma women's needs and wishes, including if and in what way they want

the help of women's NGOs, and to consider their cultural context in order to support them.

The views of these "ordinary" women are largely excluded on the websites of GPF and WAD, exceptions are the aforementioned GPF report (2006g) and the WAD and ASA report (2003). Yet, while reading the latter, it seems obvious that the report only includes women's comments that emphasise the negative outcomes of the transformations. Therefore, it supports the overall representation of women as a disadvantaged group that is more negatively affected than men. Moreover, both NGOs largely ignore women's diverse coping strategies, for example, possible informal networks, and the success of women, such as those working in the tourism sector (cf. Ghodsee 2005).

According to Ghodsee, unemployment is considered by many Bulgarians as one of the most pressing problems (2005, 53f., 155, 163, 167). However, the issue of unemployment is not addressed in any of WAD's projects. Moreover, only a few of the NGO's projects are concerned with economic issues. One project, for example, researched the 'alternative' economy in Bulgaria (WAD 2006i). A second project addressed the labour conditions of women working in the textile industry in Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia (WAD 2006j). It targeted those women, their families, trade unions, NGOs, and government institutions (ibid.).

In contrast to WAD, GPF explicitly addresses the issue of unemployment. Two projects were implemented in which Roma women participated in courses on tailoring and hairdressing (GPF 2006j). The women were hired afterwards (ibid.). The website, unfortunately, does not provide further details such as who hired the women and if they received open-ended contracts. Moreover, unemployed women are specifically targeted in one of GPF's programs (2006h); however, the only option suggested to them is to establish their own small businesses, which is problematic for several reasons.

First, women may not want to open their own businesses because, as discussed above, they resist the idea that they have to pay for

'basic needs', which the state provided in the past (Ghodsee 2003, 30; 2004, 747; 2005, 165f.). They may also refuse to take the risks involved with small businesses, for example, being unable able to repay the loans and sustaining debt if the business fails (cf. Ghodsee 2005, 154). Second, women who are willing to open their own business may lack connections and access to networks important for success (cf. Ghodsee 2005, 150). Third, the program only offers support in the form of training seminars and *The Business Start-up Guide* (GPF 2006h) but no financial help or (explicitly stated) networking opportunities.

I was unable to access the *The Business Start-up Guide*, but a look at the posted abstract (GPF 2006i) raises an additional problem. This online guide does not seem to include practical advice on how to actually start a business, for example, how to get funding or what administrative procedures such as registration and forms have to be considered. The guide instead provides information about issues that, I propose, are first steps such as "basic concepts of innovative thinking and generation innovative ideas for business, testing of ideas" (ibid.). Women may, however, need more help and practical advice. In contrast, the abstract of the *Export Guide* for women who want to expand their business explicitly states that the guide "includes practical advice" such as "first steps in export, how to make connections with partners abroad, how and where to advertise products, how to fill in export documents" (ibid.), which seems more useful than the *Start-up Guide*.

According to Ghodsee, Western donors funded NGO projects throughout Eastern Europe that were concerned with the increase of women's political participation (2003, 31). It is thus not surprising that participation of women in politics and decision-making is a central issue for GPF and WAD. WAD, for example, has implemented two projects focussing on an increase of female voters in elections (WAD 2006k, 1). Moreover, both NGOs have initiated projects aiming to support women who are (potentially) active in politics (GPF 2006k; WAD 2006k), assuming what WAD directly states in one of its project

outlines that "[m]ore women in politics will ensure a better representation of women's needs during and after the transition process in Bulgaria" (2006k). These projects, however, are problematic in several ways.

First, the idea behind most of them, that women will support and work for women's issues, is misleading (cf. Sloat 2005, 448). It assumes that women share similar interests because of their gender, which may not be the case. Second, one assumption is that "Eastern European women are not concerned with politics", although they actually are (Ghodsee 2003, 31). These women might not participate in politics "as a political act" because they may view those NGOs campaigns, funded by Western governments and agencies, as an attempt at promoting political parties which are preferred by the donors (ibid.). Third, GPF and WAD do not discuss the possibility that women may participate in politics through informal networks (cf. Berg 2004, 197) or how women might influence politics even if they are not publicly active. I agree with Ghodsee that it would be useful to examine "why women are not involving themselves in the polity" (2003, 31). Nevertheless, I tend to view both NGOs' approaches to address female and male politicians as 'on the right track', I suggest a stronger emphasis to this approach, instead of focussing on women politicians. I also think it is important to gain insight into what issues women are actually concerned with, for example, unemployment, social services, and economic security, and to advocate those issues to political parties and politicians.

### 'They loose sight of women's needs':

#### *The role of Western donors*

Another point that critics of women's NGOs in postsocialist Eastern Europe have addressed is the influence of Western donors such as the European Union or USAID on the agendas of these NGOs and on their projects. In other words, Western aid comes with 'strings attached' (e.g., Ghodsee 2004, 731, 738; 2005, 161, 166; Hemment 2004a, 821; Kay 2004, 250; Sundstrom 2002, 222). To receive funding, local women's NGOs have to propose

projects and address topics that fit into the framework of Western agencies and organisations, which might not meet the needs and wishes of their target groups (Sloat 2005, 440; Sundstrom 2002, 222).

Critics claim that views of Eastern European women on the identification of important issues have been largely ignored (e.g., Ghodsee 2005, 163; Hemment 2004b, 233). In contrast, projects addressing problems that were considered pressing by Western sponsors, such as violence against women, were funded even if local women or local NGO staff might think differently (Ghodsee 2005, 163; Hemment 2004a, 824; 2004b, 233; Ishkanian 2004, 279, 281). Ghodsee asked the director of a Bulgarian women's NGO what she considered to be the largest problem for Bulgarian women; her response was "[u]nemployment" (2005, 154). Unemployment, however, was not addressed in any of the NGO's projects because, as the director revealed, such projects were not funded by Western donors. She continued that neither the European Union nor the United States are interested in changing the situation because high unemployment means low wages which, in turn, attracts foreign investors (*ibid.*). Other problems relevant to Bulgarian women but absent in NGOs' projects included an increase in crime and a decrease in affordable food and social services (*ibid.*, 163).

One of the main issues GPF focuses on is violence against women, including domestic abuse. WAD has carried out two projects regarding trafficking of young people and child prostitution; both projects were funded by U.S. organisations and agencies (WAD 2006f, g, m). Furthermore, GPF and WAD focus on gender equality and advocate an increased participation of women in politics and decision-making. For example, three of WAD's projects addressing women's political participation either as politicians or as voters are sponsored by U.S. and Western European agencies (WAD 2006k, l, n).

Issues such as gender equality and domestic violence, however, may be viewed as foreign and abstract, as less pressing problems, or as inappropriate for public discussion by many Eastern European women including those

working for NGOs (cf. Ghodsee 2004, 744; Hemment 2004a, 822, 824; Ishkanian 2004, 279; Kay 2004, 259). The English term *gender*, for example, is used by Bulgarian NGOs due to the lack of an equivalent Bulgarian term but many women do not know the meaning (Ghodsee 2004, 744). Moreover, as Julie Hemment points out, violence against women was largely considered an interpersonal issue between women and their spouses in campaigns in Russia, which were mostly funded by Western donors (2004a, 821). Hence, the campaigns mainly excluded local perceptions and definitions of gendered violence or violence against women in general. They further did not address family-external, structural factors such as social inequality (*ibid.*, 816, 821).

I do not intend to imply that violence against women is not a problem or issue that should be addressed by NGOs, but I propose that local views as well as local strategies and solutions and broader political-economic and social contexts have to be considered (cf. Hemment 2004a, 816, 821, 836; Ishkanian 2004, 281). Moreover, women's NGOs are restricted in finding and/or implementing their original solutions to problems because Western donor organisations may propose solutions and provide guidelines how to deal with particular issues (Ghodsee 2005, 162; Ishkanian 2004, 281).

Critics further point out that scarcity of Western funding results in competition among women's NGOs (e.g., Hemment 2004b, 235; Sloat 2005, 441). Furthermore, umbrella and networking organisations might exclude small, grassroots women's organisations. Staff of the larger organisations, for example, may not be willing to share their knowledge of funding sources or their experience with application processes (Kay 2004, 256). In order to be successful with grant applications, it is crucial for NGO staff to propose projects that match the priorities of the potential funding agencies and organizations. It is a further advantage if they have special skills such as proficiency in English and knowledge of the application 'language', that means framing projects in a particular way by using the 'right' terms and

concepts (Kay 2004, 250). Consequently, NGOs whose members are not fluent in English or do not know the Western literature on development and civil society, and thus the right 'buzzwords', are disadvantaged in the competition for funding. Moreover, funding is often allocated for particular projects or programs; therefore, many NGOs cannot rely on long-term funding that would provide more sustainability (Ghodsee 2005, 162; Kay 2004, 253). The result is that NGOs have to constantly apply for grants, which may also contribute to competition among the organisations (Kay 2004, 253).

From afar, I cannot evaluate to what extent GPF and WAD compete with other NGOs. WAD's mission is to establish an alliance of organisations focussing gender equality. Consequently, NGOs that do not emphasize this issue may be excluded from these networks. I propose that GPF's and WAD's familiarity with the Western literature is demonstrated by their successful applications for Western funding and by their use of certain terms on the websites such as 'gender equality', 'sustainable development', or 'civil society'.

Eastern European NGOs largely depend on Western aid because local funding is rarely available. In Bulgaria, a country with a high unemployment rate and a stagnant economy, people may simply have no money to donate (Ghodsee 2005, 74, 153; cf. Sloat 2005, 440). Both GPF and WAD are mainly funded through Western organisations and agencies. In case the of WAD, the amount of money generated locally, for example, through membership fees, is only a minute portion of the total funding. It is thus very likely that the projects and the agendas of both NGOs are influenced by their sponsors.

To illustrate the aforementioned critiques, I will provide a closer look at the application guidelines of two donor organisations: The Global Fund for Women, WAD and Mama Cash, which funded GPF (GPF 2006f, 1; WAD 2006h). The Global Fund supports projects whose aims fall within a wide range of issues, for example, peace building, gender-based violence, civic and political participation, economic

justice, and increased access to education (The Global Fund for Women 2006). The eligible criteria for application include: the applying group has to be a women's group, "governed, directed, and led by women", is based outside of the United States, and focuses on "advancing women's equality and human rights" (ibid.). Groups ineligible to apply are, for example, groups "whose sole purpose is to generate income or provide charity to individuals" and "[w]omen's branches/departments/projects of mixed-gender organizations" (ibid.).

Mama Cash, as a women's rights organisation from the Netherlands (2007a), claims that its strength "stems from the belief that women worldwide know both how to prioritise their struggles and have the best solutions to address them" (2007b), which sounds promising. The organisation funds small, local and relatively new organisations that are led and mainly staffed by women and have "limited access to larger funding sources" (Mama Cash 2007c). The groups should work on at least one of Mama Cash's "priority themes" that are: "bodily integrity, economic justice, peace and security, agency and participation, and art, culture and media" (ibid.). Similar to The Global Fund for Women, Mama Cash considers organisations that focus "mainly or only on income generating activities, credit programmes, welfare and traditional skill training projects" as ineligible for application (ibid.).

The two donor organisations focus on women and women's groups and exclude more or less mixed-gender organisations. Although not clearly stated, it seems they promote a women-only approach rather than one that focuses on gender relations. Furthermore, they do not emphasise or consider what the women's groups themselves think women in their countries need. For example, financial support or 'traditional skill training' might be crucial to these women.

The discussion above raises the question of who is benefiting or not benefiting from the work of the NGOs (Ghodsee 2004, 737) or, said differently, do women who are supposed to benefit and be supported by NGOs really benefit? Some authors point out that middle-

class women such as intellectuals and academics and/or members of the former elite are the main beneficiaries from NGOs because the 'NGO sector' provides employment opportunities (Ghodsee 2004, 743; 2005, 168f.; Hemment 2004a, 827; 2004b, 222; Kay 2004, 252f.; Phillips 2005, 251). Well-educated women with knowledge of foreign languages, especially English, and of the literature of Western theorists and activists have a special advantage in this competitive field (Ghodsee 2005, 168f.; Kay 2004, 250f.). As described above, the ability to write applications in English and frame them in a particular way are often crucial to submit 'compelling' and successful applications. The majority of WAD's Board members as well as GPF's staff are well-educated women or academics. Two of the women working for GPF have experience in foreign trade (GPF 2006c). Therefore, they presumably are able to read, write, and speak a foreign language or have access to translators.

As stated above, the influence of Western donors on the agendas and projects of women's NGOs results in the imposition of what they think is best for the target group, while largely ignoring local women's views. Therefore, they may 'lose sight' of what women's actual problems, needs, and wishes are in contrast to those assumed or proposed by the NGOs and Western funding agencies and organisations (cf. Sloat 2005, 440). Even if local NGOs want to implement their own solutions and strategies, they are restricted by the agendas of their Western donors due to their dependency on external funding (Ghodsee 2004, 745; 2005, 161f.; Ishkanian 2004, 281).

Ghodsee argues that some Eastern European women's NGOs actually, but unintentionally, supported and promoted the expansion of Western capitalism and neoliberalism into the region (2004, 728, 749; 2005, 163f.; cf. Hemment 2004a, 836). The agendas and projects of these NGOs, as mentioned above, are informed by Western cultural feminism that was imported to Eastern Europe by Western feminists and women's organisations sponsored by Western aid or by women's programs of major international aid

agencies (Ghodsee 2004, 731, 733f.). These women's NGOs unconsciously assist neoliberalism in two ways. First, they focus on gender as a category of analysis for oppression, not on class, and thus address mainly women in their projects (Ghodsee 2004, 730, 733, 742; 2005, 163f.). Hence, they emphasise a separation between women and men and further present women as "less suited to capitalism" (Ghodsee 2004, 742). Consequently, they "undermine the possibility of a united proletariat" (*ibid.*) that potentially could "challenge neoliberal policies" (Ghodsee 2005, 164). Second, while these NGOs attempt to fix social problems and blame 'traditional' patriarchy as in case of Bulgaria, they do not criticise "larger issues of economic injustice and inequality in society", or promote structural change (Ghodsee 2004, 743). They do not criticise neoliberalism, which actually caused the decline of living standards of women (and men) in Eastern Europe in the first place (cf. *ibid.*, 728).

Ghodsee's critique can be applied to the two Bulgarian NGOs presented in this paper. First, issues such as unemployment or employment, financial support, and social services are largely absent in the programs and projects of GPF and WAD. These issues, however, are more important to many Bulgarian women than some of those issues promoted by one or both NGOs such, as the abstract and foreign topic of gender equality. Second, the NGOs may contribute to the 'spread' of capitalism by providing advice and support for the establishment of small businesses as only alternative or opportunity for unemployed women, which fits into the neoliberal framework. Third, both NGOs focus on women and present them mainly as a homogeneous, disadvantaged group; thus they may contribute with their emphasis on gender, not on class, to a separation between women and men. Fourth, the WAD and ASA report (2003) tends to present women as 'less suitable' for a capitalist market economy, for example, by focussing on women's 'passivity' and on factors for women's lack of success.

Finally, neither GPF nor WAD criticise capitalism (or neoliberalism) *itself* and they largely do not discuss to what extent the free-market economy *caused* problems and difficulties women face in their daily lives. They either blame the prevalence of 'traditional' gender and social roles (e.g., GPF 2006g, 10; WAD and ASA 2003, 47f., 51), or women's tendency to 'passivity' instead of being active and using their potential (e.g., GPF 2006g, 11; WAD and ASA 2003, 62, 77f.). While the WAD and ASA report explicitly acknowledges that the transition to market economy and the accompanied reforms did not result in a better quality of life but, on the contrary, increased economic and social gender inequalities (2003, 80f.), the recommendations to the government do not suggest structural changes but they remain within the capitalist or neoliberal framework (*ibid.*, 81ff.). For example, the report advocates to encourage women to start their own business and to be self-employed (*ibid.*, 81), but it does not consider the government responsible for providing employment. Additionally, the report recommends "free medical advice and contraceptives for the young people without [their] own incomes" (*ibid.*) but not free health care for all citizens, implying they have to pay for this service.

The following question emerges: What should women's NGOs change to effectively help and support Eastern European women? Presenting a critical account of NGOs has ethical implications, as Donna Murdock (2003, 508, 525) points out, because it might negatively influence NGOs' access to funding. Scholarly accounts could be used by donor agencies to justify cutting of funding or rejecting applications. Nevertheless, I propose that changes are necessary in order for women's NGOs, including the two presented in this paper, to be more helpful for their target group (cf. Ghodsee 2005, 171). These NGOs ought to pay more attention to local women's needs and wishes (cf. Murdock 2003). Many Bulgarian women may prioritize issues such as (un)employment, social services, and economic survival in contrast to gender equality or women's participation in politics favoured by

NGOs. They might wish these organisations would provide more 'practical' help, for example, 'marketable skills' (cf. Murdock 2003:521), strategies for finding employment or coping with unemployment, financial support as well as legal and social services.

The provision of social services by NGOs is, however, problematic. If NGOs provide services that were formerly considered responsibilities of the state, they might contribute to the privatization of these services and hence be (unintentionally) complicit with proponents of neoliberalism (cf. Ghodsee 2005, 166; Murdock 2003, 521; Phillips 2005, 256f.). Nonetheless, I argue that women's NGOs have to intensify their focus on local women's views of what they want and need. Related to this issue is Ghodsee's suggestion that NGOs ought to become more independent of Western (feminist) 'experts' and imported gender-project templates (2005, 171f.). They need to focus on finding "homegrown solutions" (*ibid.*, 172) and incorporating local strategies. Therefore, they should abandon the view of women as 'objects of instructions' for what is best for them and the attempt to implement pre-developed solutions. This does not mean that Western activists cannot provide valuable knowledge to Eastern European NGOs. Ghodsee further proposes that some Western women want to help to "solve the real problems of women and men in Eastern Europe" (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, this help should be based on more equal relations: Bulgarian or Eastern Europeans take the lead and Western women (or, I propose, activists) support local activities and agendas (*ibid.*).

Ghodsee also argues that women's NGOs need to become more independent of funding from Western donors (2005, 171). As much as I agree with her proposition, I think this is probably the most problematic of her suggestions. She does not present alternatives for funding sources. As I described above, the possibility of receiving local funding is very limited due to the difficult economic situation of most Bulgarians and Eastern Europeans in general. What are women's NGOs options? I think that Ghodsee is correct in her assertion for the necessity of independence from Western

funding but it needs additional work and creativity to find alternatives. Moreover, she suggests that NGOs have to challenge the negative effects of neoliberalism and promote change (ibid., 173), which is one of her most salient suggestions. I would go further and argue that not only Bulgarian and Eastern European NGOs but also Western donor organisations and agencies have to challenge capitalism and neoliberalism. There is value in listening to local women: what *they* think they need and want matters.

Finally, one issue has been overlooked by NGOs and also by most critics presented in this paper:<sup>5</sup> the issue of gender *relations*. As described above, Ghodsee argues that Bulgarian NGOs embracing cultural feminism weaken the possibility of a coalition between women and men based on class that could potentially resist neoliberal policies (2004, 728; 2005, 164). Instead they focus on women and oppose women and men while representing women as less capable to compete in the free-market economy (ibid.). Although GFP and WAD propose gender equality, meaning the equal opportunities of women and men, 'gender', I suggest, refers here more or less exclusively to women. While both NGOs focus on women and women's issues, men are absent or only marginally addressed in their projects (e.g., male politicians), or they are presented in opposition to women (e.g., WAD and ASA 2003, 62, 78, 81).

The NGOs largely ignore that many Bulgarian women do not distinguish their problems from those of men or consider themselves as more disadvantaged or 'worse off' than men (Ghodsee 2004, 735f.). For example, the unemployment rate of men has exceeded that of women since 2001 (Ghodsee 2004, 744, 746; 2005, 57). Moreover, some women, for example, those with higher education and foreign language skills working in the tourism sector, had advantages over men in the early years of the transformations (Ghodsee 2004, 736). Additionally, the NGOs do not consider

that women may want to have their partners included in the projects (cf. GPF 2006g, 8, 15), or that they potentially side with men from their own class or social group rather than with their supposed 'sisters' from other classes or groups (cf. Ghodsee 2004, 728; Mohanty 1991, 63f., 70f.). They also overlook that women may subordinate their situations and problems under those of the family, ethnic group, or nation (cf. Ishkanian 2004, 269).

Keeping those issues in mind, I suggest that NGOs such as GPF and WAD can address and incorporate gender relations in several ways into their programs and projects. First, NGOs need to consider how women and men of different groups view and negotiate their relations instead of assuming two more or less homogeneous groups that are largely opposed to each other. Consequently, they have to acknowledge that women may not view their situation and problems as different from those of men of the same class or group (cf. Ghodsee 2004, 735f.) but that they differentiate between themselves and women of other classes or groups. Second, NGOs ought to ask what local women's and men's priority issues are and in which ways they can support them. Based on the first two points, my third suggestion is to pursue a 'women-and-men-together' approach as opposed to a 'women-only' or 'women-in-opposition-to-men' approach. It means to include and address women *and* men in their projects while being sensitive to gender relations within a particular local context. Consequently, NGOs and scholars may ask the following questions pointed out by Sherrie Larkin (personal comm., December 7, 2006): Can women empower men? Can women work alongside men? If so, how?

#### Conclusion:

##### *It's all about women (?)*

In my paper I have presented a critical review of women's NGOs in postsocialist Eastern Europe and of two Bulgarian NGOs, the Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation (GPF) and the Women's Alliance for Development (WAD). I particularly focussed in my discussion on the representations of local women and the role of Western donors. I titled

<sup>5</sup> An exception is Ghodsee (2004, 2005).

this paper *It's all About Cinderella – and the Prince?* drawing on the titles of two publications focussing on women in Eastern Europe: the book *Cinderella Goes to the Market* by Barbara Einhorn (1993) and the article *Cinderella Seeks Shelter* by Laura Brunell (2002). Both publications claim that the democratization process in Eastern Europe is not a “Cinderella story” for women in the region (Brunell 2002, 493). They, however, do not further discuss why they refer to Eastern European women as Cinderella. I tried to draw attention with my title to gender relations. ‘Prince’ stands here for local men who were absent or marginalized in the NGOs agendas and projects. As described above, many Bulgarian women, and Eastern European women in general, do not separate their problems from those of men. Therefore, I suggest that it is important for NGOs not only to address women in their projects and to oppose women and men but to involve men more strongly and pursue a ‘women-and-men-together’ approach.

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Moreover, the purpose of women's NGOs seem to be at first glance about local women. However, I argue that it is more about funding, Western donors, and their visions of what is best for Eastern European women. This results in considering local women as passive victims and as 'objects of instruction' who have to be enlightened about their rights and situations. Furthermore, they are supported in ways Western donors and local NGOs willingly or unwillingly 'dictate', while ignoring or restricting women's and men's views of what their needs and wishes are. Drawing on Ghodsee (2005, 172), it would be better for both local women and men if the situation were to reverse itself: Eastern European women and men enlighten Western donors and so-called experts and receive support for things and in ways they envision.

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