The Russian case reveals that the post-communist state can suffer just as much from inaction and inattention, as from a dramatic reform. If not explicitly protected through state funding and strong legal frameworks, women’s equality can fade away. Certainly, as some have argued, the introduction of capitalism sharpens inequalities between men and women. However, there is no logical reason why capitalism automatically causes employers to favour male workers over female ones, to consider day cares to be a drain on society, or to call for restrictions on abortion. If such developments occur during a transition, it is important to consider how political beliefs and assumptions arise, and how politicians make decisions about their priorities. In a highly charged, intense political environment, under conditions of perceived urgency, competing beliefs and assumptions about how to organize society can swirl. In Russia, the early post-communist transition removed institutions which in the Soviet past had protected women to a certain degree, while introducing sudden disadvantages for women in the new market economy. Post-communist leaders took few concrete steps to provide policies to enable working women to maintain their financial independence. A lack of legal protection for women meant that some became worse off as a result of the transition, and the regime actually reified this disadvantaged status rather than promoting policies to encourage the social inclusion of women. As a result, the sudden removal of Soviet policies affected women as much as if the regime had overtly passed patriarchal laws.

Social welfare and gender equality were closely linked in this early transition in several ways. First, as Katalin Fábián argued, social welfare issues have often brought women into politics in post-communist countries. In Russia, some female politicians attributed post-communist
social welfare crises to the low level of women’s representation in the political leadership. As a result, some women were drawn to public office in order to promote laws and policies that might improve social welfare. Second, the state’s endeavour to establish legal protection of the private sphere was used to justify the shrinking of the state’s social commitments. Individuals and families would now be expected to provide for themselves, meaning that there would be a legal justification to reduce welfare state programmes. Third, the lack of legal protection for women’s workplace rights worsened the social position of women (and that of their dependents), and increased the demand for the state to expand social welfare efforts.

When the post-communist transition began in Eastern Europe and Russia, women now had more opportunities for free expression and organization. However, they found themselves largely outside of top offices, with less access to elected bodies, and facing social-conservative political parties with agendas unsympathetic to gender equity. Moreover, for various reasons, women found themselves at a disadvantage in new processes for accumulating property. In some contexts, women seemed to be allowing their husbands to become de facto heads of households, even when women were actually the primary breadwinner. At the same time, some scholars demonstrated that in some situations and social groups, women had coped better than men with the strains of the post-communist transition. In the Russian case, it was sometimes argued that declining access to day care was proof that social policy had shifted to privilege the single-income family. However, the incomes of many men were not sufficient to support a family. Women provided 40 per cent of family income, so staying at home was not a viable option for many women. Whereas a good deal of feminist scholarship tends to look at women’s political action specifically, this study looks squarely at the ways in which gender and social welfare were linked in the political system as a whole.

Social policy in Russia: gender-centred discourses and processes

In the early years of the transition, Russia had the opportunity to benefit from international dialogue on gender equality. As Janet Elise Johnson has argued, international organizations and their links with local Russian feminist groups enabled the commencement of new initiatives to improve the status of women, such as raising awareness of domestic violence. Among the most important institutions was the Convention