Under socialism, women gained greater access than they had previously enjoyed to education, job training, and employment opportunities. The paternalistic state over time introduced and extended to most women, at least formally, a number of social rights and accompanying services and benefits. This session of our round table takes up the question of how the introduction of a market economy and a measure of democratic political participation in some of the former communist countries has changed the conditions of economic and social justice for women.

In the socialist period, many occupations continued to be almost wholly gendered or performed predominantly by one or the other sex, and male jobs usually paid better than those occupied by females. But work was widely available, as were a modicum of accompanying benefits such as guaranteed vacations, maternity leave, medical and social services.

Since the turn to a market economy and loosening, if not loss, of communist party control, how has the access of women to education and employment changed? Have the new occupations created in a market economy become gendered? If so, how so and with what effects? Have opportunities for female employment expanded or contracted (as compared to male employment)? How do issues of age and attractiveness (“lookism”) affect employment opportunities for women?

What is the current condition of the social safety net for women? What forms of protection, legal and social, exist to ensure women’s rights to security of person and property? Do women have access to legal aid? To affordable medical and childbirth services? Maternity leave with benefits and job security? Affordable child care services? Adequate child support and alimony? Affordable mental health consultations?

To what extent are social and employment protections and services internally defined (that is, based on a country’s own traditions and initiative) and to what extent defined by external influences and agencies such as the European Union or the United Nations?