Women on women: a study of the communist press and women tobacco workers in interwar Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the history of women tobacco workers in Bulgaria in the interwar period, as considered through the analysis of three communist periodicals. It reconstructs women's working conditions and their struggles as gendered workers through the analysis of articles within the periodicals which concern their experience and relationships to organised struggle. The relationship between organised and unorganised women workers is explored as present in the writings of contributors to the newspapers. In light of the gendered nature of working women's precarious condition which was characterised by risks of being dismissed on grounds related to them being perceived as women and by gendered harassment among other factors, I argue that the notion of precarity as conceived in labour history needs to be reconceptualised in light of its contingency on power structures. I consider the ways in which women writers constructed the groups of organised and unorganised working women. I argue that despite contributors' insistence on the irreplaceability of union membership, the collective struggles of organised and unorganised women overlapped significantly, as did their rates of success. Apart from contributing to feminist labour history, the thesis makes a contribution to the field of periodical studies by addressing the scarce engagement with labour-related periodicals in the field and discussing issues of authorship.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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Signed: Kamelia Tzeneva

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List of Abbreviations

BCP – Bulgarian Communist Party (Balgarska Komunisticheska Partiya)
BWP (n.s.) – Bulgarian Workers' Party (narrow socialists) (Balgarka Rabotnicheska Partiya [shiroki sotsialisti])
BAPU – Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union (Balgarski Zemedelski Naroden Sayuz)
CWTU – Common Workers' Trade Union (Obsht Rabotnicheski Sindikalen Sayuz)
FTU – Free Trade Union (Svoboden Sindikalen Sayuz)
TWU – Tobacco Workers' Union (Tiutiunorabotnicheski Sayuz)
IWPU – Independent Workers' Professional Unions (Nezavisimi Obedineni Profesionalni Sayuzi)
LPS – Law for Protection of the State (Zakon za zashtita na darzhavata)
PIF – Public Insurance Fund (Fond Obshtestveno Osiguryavane)

1. Introduction: from a gallery in 2019 to the tobacco warehouses in 1919

I became interested in the history of the tobacco industry about two years ago upon a visit to a temporary exhibition in the city of Plovdiv called *Smoke*. The exhibition was part of the European Capital of Culture initiative and was hosted in one of the tobacco warehouses at the centre of the city which had until very recently been an abandoned building, already crumbling down. There are two main reasons I was excited to go: one was that this exhibition explicitly engaged with social history, and it was supposed to present a narrative which centers ordinary working people, and this is something extremely rare in present-day Bulgaria. The second reason was that this exhibition stood as one of the very few examples in our day of cultural and historical legacy being revived and protected. The tobacco warehouses in Plovdiv, now affectionately called the Tobacco City, have been in ruins for many decades and their future has been the centre of a heated public debate about how the Bulgarian state is dealing with architectural heritage. The warehouse where the exhibition was held remains the only one which has been renovated, and the rest remain a health hazard. One of them, it was recently announced, is about to become a hip office building.

As soon as I walked in, I started sensing that my expectations had been naive. On the first floor, devoted to the beginning of the tobacco industry and its development until 1944 when the power regime changed, behind the large machines for tobacco processing and the hanging bunches of large dry tobacco leaves, the walls were covered in big portraits of visibly affluent men. I got closer in order to read the explanatory texts – those were tobacco traders, factory and warehouse owners who had had the benevolence to use part of their profits to build a school, hospital and cultural centre in Plovdiv, among other things. The philanthropy of these men was the centre of

the narrative. There were small prints of working people, mostly women, hung around the room, which only had captions describing the contents of the photographs. The transition to the second floor which was dedicated to the state socialist period and contemporary times had the first description of working conditions – the text focused on how unbearable these were after the communists came to power. What the exhibition was clearly communicating was the following – capitalism is a system of returning to the local community, socialism is a system which exploits people.

Although the recent state socialist past in Bulgaria is the most contested phenomenon in political and media discourse, and fervent anti-communism imbues both, I was amazed to see such a blatant celebration of times which were particularly hard for ordinary people, and such a swift and decisive condemnation of what had come to follow, all of this in the name of reinforcing the status quo interpretation of Bulgaria's past. The striking marginalisation of the people who had made this industry run and without whom there would be no story to be told, all in order to celebrate the people who were directly responsible for the poverty in which the former lived both astounded me and made me think about how little has changed. In one sense, what I was seeing was a very truthful representation of the history of the working classes and peasantry – here, they were being dehumanised and made irrelevant in a way very similar to how they were seen 'by society' (read the middle and upper classes which had the access to writing history, laws, respectable interpretations of reality) in the times of their lives.

This experience made me want to know more about that side of the history I learnt nothing about from the exhibition, but also to do something about it – to tell an alternative story which pays tribute to the ones we never hear anything about but who are the majority of the actors in history. To learn how to make visible the undeniable parallels between contemporary political

marginalisations with very felt, material consequences and those which preceded them and in which they are rooted. Little did I know that picking this topic would lead me on a long and complicated journey through history and politics which would make me face some of my own prejudices and unconscious assumptions, and to reconsider some of my own political convictions and beliefs.

The main object of study of this thesis are a series of articles written by women workers and communist party activists and published in three communist newspapers from the interwar period, as well as a number of articles which were written by men or published anonymously but which all focus on women workers' issues and their relationship to the organised workers' movement. The newspapers which I will consider are *Ravenstvo* (Equality) (1919-1923), *Rabotnichka* (Woman Worker) (1924-1925; 1929-1934) and *Tiutiunorabotnik* (Tobacco Worker) (1908-1925; 1929-1930). I focus on articles concerning women tobacco workers in all three newspapers (the overall contents of which will be discussed in the next chapter). The approximately 70 articles considered in the thesis, were, for the most part, published in order to shed light on women's working and living conditions as well as to serve the purpose of agitating other women to organise in the communist trade unions and/or join the communist party lines. These are broadly the questions the answers of which this thesis pursues: How was women workers' experience at work gendered? What can these articles and their presence in communist newspapers tell us about these women's position in relation to and struggles in the male-dominated spaces of party politics and union organizing? In relation to other working women? What can the existence and contents of these entries tell us about the Bulgarian unionized workers' movement relationship to working women? I attempt to answer these questions while

also addressing gaps in wider literatures engaged with the topics of precarity and women's presence in periodicals and in relation to working women's collective action.

The thesis is structured as follows:

In the first chapter I consider the political climate which circumscribed the existence of these periodicals and the struggles of working women in which they are imbricated. I also consider the characteristics of three publications and the unions which they were adjacent to. In the literature review, I engage with a variety of literatures relevant to my topic, ranging from global labour history to labour history in Central and Eastern Europe and feminist economics. In the first of the three analytical chapters I focus on working conditions in the tobacco industry and women's precarity. In light of my findings I argue for a reconceptualisation of precarity which puts power relations center-stage. The topic of the following chapter are the constructions of varying groups of working women (e.g. organised and unorganised) put forward by women contributors to the three newspapers. Through considering prevalent tropes, such as that of 'women without consciousness', and notions associated with womanhood (such as that of femininity), I analyse the ways in which women writers constructed the categories which they themselves were part of or stood in opposition to (in the case of the category of unorganised women). I consider my findings in relation to the field of feminist periodical studies and propose that a decentering of authorship can benefit future research. In the third and last analytical chapter, I focus on instances of women's collective action, both as part of the organised movement and in relation to spontaneous mobilisations. I argue that these two broad types of collective resistance overlap in many ways which are not credited by the periodicals themselves. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I consider my findings in relation to one another and discuss the contributions the thesis makes to the respective fields of literature.

2. Communist activism during the rule of the Agrarians and under right-wing authoritarianism (1919-1932). The Common Workers' Trade Union, the Independent Tobacco Workers' Union and the three newspapers

In this chapter I will consider the political climate in the country during the period which spans the discussed articles (1919 and 1932), after which I will provide an overview of the unions to which the newspapers studied here were attached. A big part of the articles discussed in this thesis concern women workers' precarious situations which were made even more insecure if they were seeking to unionise but didn't have secure union structures in place; if they were trying to organise strikes or were merely disseminating the newspapers which are the present object of study. Taking into account the broader political context in the period is thus important if we are to better grasp the significance and meanings of the workers' actions. The political climate in the country during the period is further very important to consider when discussing these periodicals, as it circumscribed the possibility of their legal existence and by being highly repressive defined very tight boundaries around the scope of activities they could undertake. This was a turbulent time in Bulgarian politics. From 1919 until the end of WWII, the bourgeois 'parties of order' were pushed into the background. The party-parliamentary democracy in state governance was abandoned after 1923 and the political regime became decisively authoritarian (Daskalov 2005: 243; Parvanova 2012: 224). During the period discussed here the country was governed by three main political formations which were the leaders of coalitions. These differed to varying extents but all of which felt threatened by communism and took measures to restrict its growing influence. Those were the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union (BAPU) (1919-1923), The Democratic Alliance (1923-1931) and the Popular Bloc (1931-1934). I will give a brief overview

of the rule and politics of these three consecutive governments and I will discuss their main characteristics with reference to their attitudes towards and relationships with the radical left.

2.1. The rule of the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union, the Democratic Alliance and the People's Bloc

The years after the First World War were a time of great political turmoil at the same time as they marked the rise of the industrial sector in Bulgaria. The tobacco industry had developed especially much during WWI (Dimitrova 2014: 240). This came as the result of the rise of interest in tobacco products both on the national and international market (Dimitrov 2014: 132) and was part of a general rise in the industrial sector after the war, tobacco being the fastest growing industry (ibid.: 133). While the industrial sector was surging and foreign capital was becoming an increasingly significant factor in Bulgarian industrial relations, the country was in deep economic and political crisis after the war. This complicated state of affairs was the context in which the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union came to power. BAPU was a mass party with the broadest social base in Bulgaria which sought to represent the peasants (Daskalov 2011: 87). Their rule has been defined as 'not quite authoritarian' but as having totalitarian tendencies (Parvanova 2012: 226). After ascending to power through elections, BAPU formed a coalition with right-wing parties in October 1919 (Daskalov 2011: 88). Both the 'narrow' socialists (later the Communist party) and the 'broad' socialists (social democrats) had refused to form a

government with them, and the postwar crisis resulted in a struggle of left-wing forces for supremacy, and throughout their rule there was significant tension between all left-wing forces. The culmination of the political crisis was the transport strike of December 1919 – January 1920, organised by the 'narrow' and 'broad' socialists, which turned into a general political strike which was decisively put down by the government (ibid.: 90). After the strike, BAPU put in place several laws which restricted the freedom of association for unions in 1922 (Daskalov 2005a: 295). In May 1920 BAPU formed a government on its own after winning new elections: they offered the narrow socialists cooperation twice but both times they were turned down. From the standpoint of the communists, BAPU was a petty bourgeois party which wanted to achieve its utopian ideas of 'peasant democracy' within the bourgeois social establishment (ibid.). It was also a rival in left-wing politics and was therefore no suitable coalition partner (as no other political formation would be at that time). From the point of view of the Bulgarian bourgeoisie BAPU was 'the lesser evil' which would save them from communism (ibid.). Central to BAPU's specific ideology was the 'rule of the people' through estatist organisations, estates representing the different social layers of society (peasants, workers, artisans, etc.) (ibid.: 94). In this framework BAPU saw itself as the estatist organization of the peasants, the Socialist party: as that of the workers (which is one of the reasons BAPU initially tried to form a government with them). Strong, far-reaching interference of the state was essential (ibid.: 95). The 'rule of the people' also implicated a wide-ranging social program (democratization of education, decentralized healthcare, a solution to the housing problem) a lot of which did become reality through multiple reforms. This presented a peculiar 'third' or 'middle' way between socialism and capitalism, as private property was preserved (ibid.). Of particular relevance here is the fact that the promotion of culture through law during BAPU's rule was combined with censorship,

especially against communist publications (ibid.: 97). BAPU' political rhetoric relied on bitter, emotional criticism of all political parties, the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, some professions, and the regime was characterised by threats, roughness and occasional acts of violence (ibid.). BAPU was overthrown by a violent coup-d-etat of the Military League on the 9th of June 1923, in which the union's leader Aleksandar Stamboliiski was violently killed (Daskalov 2005: 244). In power came the National Concord, which was reformed into the Democratic Alliance shortly thereafter, headed by Aleksandar Tsankov (Daskalov 2005: 198).

Even though none of the articles considered were written during the rule of the Democratic Alliance, I will pay special attention to their governance, as it played a crucial role in the way communists would be treated in the successive period as well. The newly formed government included all oppositional parties except for the second biggest one, the Bulgarian Communist Party, whose members and sympathisers came to be considered the biggest threat to national security and who became the victims of intense political prosecution.

After the coup, the ruling regime and the 'forces of order' became extremely repressive towards political enemies in the name of the 'protection of the state' which gives the Democratic Alliance a terrorist appearance (Daskalov 2005: 244). Overall, the Democratic Alliance regime has been qualified as "authoritarian-terrorist" (ibid.: 203). Political and military repressions characterised the period, including torture in police stations and prisons. In the September Uprising of the same year, in which communists, anarchists and sympathisers of BAPU joined forces to try to bring down the government, between 1130 and 1350 communists were killed (ibid.: 245). In order to suppress further attempts at collective resistance, in January 1924, an extremely repressive law was introduced – the Law for Protection of the State (LPS, *Zakon za zashtita na darzhavata*), which was applied consistently until the end of WWII, mainly against leftist forces

(Daskalov 2005: 245; Milkova 1976: 78). The LPS declared the communist party and all affiliated organisations illegal and was then used as justification for the detainment and prosecution of thousands of communists. Apart from the party, the Communist Youth Union and the Common Workers' Trade Union (CWTU) were pronounced disbanded (Bozhilov et al 1993: 597-8). All communist activity had to suddenly and immediately go underground.

After the infamous St Nedelya Church assault in April 1925, in which a communist group bombed the church hoping they would eliminate the state elite and the tsar, the authorities became completely ruthless towards communists, killing a minimum of 670 people without a court hearing and a sentence. There were sadistic torturings, a multitude of court cases and 179 death sentences, and prisons were overflowing. By the end of the year the country was close to a civil war when the Bulgarian Communist Party changed its course to move away from the plan for an armed uprising. After the bombing, the LPS was amended to include death sentences and widening the scope of offenses for which one could be imprisoned, making prosecution of communists even more intense. The mid-1920s also signalled a general worsening of working conditions specifically for tobacco workers. After the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922) ended, by 1925 Greece and Turkey had returned on the international tobacco market which led to a rapid fall in prices of tobacco (Dimitrov 2014: 135). This meant that industrialists started struggling even before the world economic crisis (ibid.) which resulted in a significant cut in workers' wages countrywide and in great unemployment. After Aleksandar Tsankov resigned in 1926, the following five years in which Andrey Lyaptchev headed the Democratic Alliance brought some liberalisation to the political system, but the regime remained authoritarian (Parvanova 2014: 227). This is a period generally described as one of pacifying social conflict (Daskalov 2005: 206). The repressions of communists continued but amnesty was given to about 1000 political

prisoners some of whom were communists (Foskolo 2013: 102). In 1927 the BCP became legal again under the name of the Workers' Party, and the CWTU returned with a modified name (discussed in the final section). The illegal structures of the party, however, remained in place (Daskalov 2005: 206). In 1931 elections were held in which the newly-formed People's Bloc came into power and remained in office until 1934.

The main political forces in the People's Bloc were BAPU and the Democratic Party. Their rule was commonly characterised in state-socialist historiography as a 'breakage in the fascist dictatorship' (Parvanova 2014: 227) but more recent analyses have pointed to the many continuities between the rule of the Democratic Alliance and the People's Bloc (Daskalov 2005: 206; 2011: 149; Parvanova 2014; Kolev 1995). Complete freedom of the press was announced and some leftist publications started getting printed legally again, but the LPS remained in operation and repressions of communists continued (Kolev 1995: 34). Daskalov (2005: 207) argues that the People's Bloc lost people's respect with the corruption, nepotism and pettiness prevalent in the government structure. Even though their rule led to a normalisation in political life (a hesitant return of parliamentary democracy), no significant reforms took place during their rule, which seems to be the least memorable of the interwar period in Bulgaria.

2.2. The Common Workers' Trade Union and the Tobacco Workers' Union

This section will discuss the state of workers' organising during the period and will focus on the unions which the newspapers were affiliated to: these are the Common Workers' Trade Union and The Independent Tobacco Workers' Union, both of which were affiliated to the BCP. From

the early 1900s and throughout the period discussed here there were two main workers' organisations: the Common Workers' Trade Union (CWTU) which was established in 1904 under the influence of the 'narrow' socialists and the Free Trade Union (FTU) related to the 'broad' socialists. Unfortunately, only very fragmentary information is available about the gender composition of the unions.[1] Vodenicharova and Popova state that the years after WWI brought a great upsurge in the number of 'enlightened' women: while in 1905-1915 only about 1000 women were engaged with the revolutionary organisations, in the period 1915-1923 this number rose to 10 000 (Vodenicharova and Popova 1972: 115). Specifically concerning the CWTU, in 1914 it had 414 women members, and in 1922 their number was 5200 (ibid.: 114). In terms of women's engagement with the party, the liberal periodical *Zhenski Glas* (Woman's Voice), which was the organ of the Bulgarian Women's Union, reports that at the end of July 1921 there were 65 communist women's groups with 4212 members of whom 1389 were industrial workers and 2510 were housewives. They are reported to have had 870 group gatherings, 193 conferences with women workers, 375 gatherings in various residential areas and 280 events open to the general public[2].

Concerning the agitational work among women workers in the early 1920s, in a report for the Third Congress of the Comintern, Clara Zetkin stated that the Bulgarian and German revolutionary women's movements are some of the strongest in relation to communist organising in Europe in general (Zetkin 2015[1921]: 782). She also praised the relative autonomy women's initiatives had whilst being "in close organisational and ideological partnership with the bodies of the party as a whole" (ibid.: 785). It wasn't until the First World War that workers' unions

[1]The restrictive measures in Bulgaria in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic significantly hampered my access to both secondary literature and primary sources which might have been useful in this respect.

[2] *Zhenski Glas* (17-18) (31 May 1921), p. 7

started becoming more influential. In the interwar period there were two unsuccessful attempts at uniting them (in 1920 and 1926) but they led an energetic ideological struggle against one another from their very establishment which prevented the uniting of union forces (Daskalov 2005a: 290-1).

The CWTU was an umbrella organisation for professional unions, of which the Independent Tobacco Workers Union was one (established in 1908). The union was one of the strongest in the country and was responsible for starting most of the general workers' strikes during the 1920s and 1930s. Overall, there is no available information on the ratio of women and men who participated in the union and it is thus impossible to give an estimate. Already in 1910, however, the tobacco workforce comprised of over 78% women and most available photos of tobacco strikers show female workers (Neuburger 2013: 67) and they remained a similar percentage right after the war[3]. While this cannot in itself tell us a lot about the proportion by which women were part of the union, it at least suggests that the majority of strikers, or at least many of them, were women – as strikes of tobacco workers usually encompassed nearly all workers at any given factory (strike-breakers were a rare occurrence; their names were often listed in strike bulletins[4]). Judging from the reports of congresses of the union, its leaders seem to have been exclusively men[5]. The tasks of the unions typically ranged from mutual aid in case of illness and unemployment to the organisation of strikes. After WWI, the influence of the CWTU grew immensely among workers while that of the 'broad' socialists decreased and in 1920 a part of the FTU joined the CWTU, accepting the guidance of the Comintern (ibid.: 294). In 1919 the CWTU had 335 sections with over 30 000 members, and over 34 000 in 1923. At the same time

[3] *Tiutiunorabotnik* VIII (3) (29 June 1919), p. 1
[4] For example, "Biuletin №1", Central State Archive, f. 166 (1), a.e. 17
[5] *Tiutiunorabotnik* VIII (14-15) (4 September 1920), p. 1

the FSU had only around 3000 members. Workers were welcomed in the CWTU irrespective of their political beliefs. Until 1922 unions had complete freedom to organise (ibid.: 292). After the transport strike mentioned in the first section the laws which BAPU instituted to restrict independent organisations meant that the Ministry of Internal Affairs became a controlling organ for all union activity and for the behaviour of all who entered them (ibid.: 296). The LPS from 1924 brought the end of the legal existence of the CWTU, and as Daskalov asserts, the organised movement never again managed to recover (ibid.). When the Communist party was legalised again in 1925, in October the same year the old CWTU reemerged under the name of Independent Workers' Professional Unions (IWPU). It continued its activities in a semi-legal manner. Importantly, the illegality (and subsequent semi-legality) of the union meant that the stakes for the workers who wrote agitational materials were very high and came at a serious risk of their losing their jobs and even getting incarcerated. To give an idea of the risks involved in being engaged with the radical press, it was a total of 6 women editors of *Rabotnichka* who went to prison for periods between 1 and 6 months[6]. At the end of 1925 the organisation had 4800 members, and in 1934: 11 000 (ibid.). While the party affiliation had made unions stronger, it also made them dependent on the party's fate.

Tobacco workers were traditionally the most organised industrial workers. They formed a large part of the workers within the CWTU and also the BCP (Laskova 1974: 48; Gerdzhikova 1979: 6; Pitekov 2010: 108). The TWU in particular employed a variety of tactics for the overall improvement of workers' condition. In 1919 there was a big and successful tobacco workers' strike in Plovdiv after which the wages of workers were raised significantly but some of the organisers remained jobless afterwards (Kodzheikov 1949: 54). A big tobacco workers' strike

[6] *Rabotnichka* IV (2) (22 November 1931), p. 1

which lasted over a month took place in 1922 in multiple cities was highly successful: it led to significant pay rises, a shortened working day and guaranteed jobs for all the strikers (Pitekov 2010: 107). The success of the strike led to tobacco factory and warehouse owners (both Bulgarian and foreign) to gain respect for the union and take their demands into more serious consideration (ibid.). "While in 1919-1920 there were a total of 135 strikes in which 76 310 people participated of which 16 682, in 1922 alone there were 191 strikes with a much larger number of strikers" (Vodenicharova and Popova 1972: 127). There was once again a big upsurge in strikes in the period between 1931 and 1934 when unemployment was growing steadily (ibid.: 157). Vodenicharova and Popova hold that "women were at the forefront of these struggles" but they don't provide any relevant numbers to support this statement (ibid.).

2.3. The three newspapers: Tiutiunorabotnik, Ravenstvo and Rabotnichka

All three newspapers analyzed in this thesis were in some way affiliated to the communist party at the time. They were published besides the main party organ (*Rabotnichesko delo: Worker's Deed*), although often articles written for these smaller periodicals would be re-published there. The intended readership of the newspapers appears to have been both organised and unorganised women, and in the case of *Tiiutiunorabotnik*, both male and female tobacco workers. For organised workers, on the one hand, they were meant to serve as a source of information about the current state of affairs at home and abroad, and as a source of inspiration to agitate among their colleagues. On the other hand, unorganised workers who were often the main addressees of articles, were meant to become convinced of the necessity to become organised in the CWTU. What the actual readership of the newspapers was, however, must have differed significantly

from the intended audience, as most copies were distributed to subscribed readers (who were presumably women already engaged in the workers' organisations) and also considering the high illiteracy rate amongst workers and especially women: meaning that a lot of the addressees of the paper would not even have been able to engage with the publication. Finally, although relatively cheap[7], the newspapers still cost money and this presumably served as a barrier to the publication even to women who could read. In terms of the layout and use of visual material, *Ravenstvo* and *Tiutiunorabotnik* are extremely similar (the same font and layout are used): images are rare, and usually to be found only on the front page. These are always portraits, mostly of men considered to have contributed significantly to the advancement of the workers' movement or of organised workers who have passed away. A portrait of Vela Blagoeva, who is considered to be the first leftist organiser among women in Bulgaria, is also featured in *Ravenstvo*[8]. *Rabotnichka* is even scarcer in terms of visual material: at least in the issues which I gained access to, there are no images whatsoever. The lack of images and the denseness of the text makes the publications somewhat cumbersome to read which might have been off-putting to potential readers. The writing styles in all three newspapers are accessible: while complicated topics are often the subject of writing, such as international affairs and the effects of changes in economic policies, these are almost invariably tackled in a very digestible manner. On a few occasions in *Rabotnichka* there are letters from working women who demand a clarification of a particular concept or event that was discussed in a previous issue, followed by a response from the contributor or editor. The overall accessible language of the newspapers, as well as the inclusion of these clarifications show a commitment on the side of the editorials to engage their intended

[7] *Ravenstvo* cost 40 stotinki per issue, *Rabotnichka* and *Tiutiunorabotnik* – 1 lev.
[8] *Ravenstvo* III (1) (1 August 1921), p. 1

audiences. In what follows, I present the three newspapers separately and put forward some of their characteristics[9].

Tiutiunorabottnik (Tobacco Worker) was the organ of the Tobacco Workers Union (TWU), which was part of the umbrella CWTU discussed above. It was issued from 1908 to 1925 and then in 1929 and 1930. It was a monthly periodical and always consisted of four pages. Although I could not find information about the editorial board of the newspaper, it is likely the case that it was dominated by men similarly to the union which issued it. *Tiutiunorabotnik* includes articles on a number of topics: unemployment, news from and decisions of the tobacco union and its conferences, reports of strikes, the usefulness of strikes, small articles reporting activities of the union's regional branches, articles reporting about strike action abroad, articles explaining how changes in the industry (e.g. in prices; quality of tobacco; rates of export) will affect workers, articles exposing and critiquing the exploitation of workers by factory owners. The articles written by women fall somewhere in between the two categories of reporting from local branches and the exposing of the abuses of power of factory owners and labour inspectors. In the years in the given period which are available in the archives (year VIII (1919/20), IX (1920/21), X (1921/22) and XII (1924/25) there is a varying number of articles that can be identified as written by women: from 1 in year VIII, to 8 in year IX, 6 in year X, and 0 in year XII. It is possible that some of the anonymously written articles which don't deal with issues specific to women were written by women, but there is no way of ascertaining the authorship of these. Women's attitudes towards the male-dominated sphere of union organising as present in the pages of *Tiutiunorabotnik* are relatively unambiguous. As visible in a number of articles, the union is

[9] Unfortunately, I was not able to gain access to secondary literature which discusses *Tiutiunorabotnik* due to the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and an ongoing reconstruction on the National Library in Sofia which is the only public library in which I could find copies of relevant books (see, for example, Vangelov 1955)

always presented as the one possibility for women to have real protection and to work towards their liberation. Critiques of the CWTU or the local branches are nowhere to be seen which does, however, make sense in a publication whose main purpose is to promote the union.

Ravenstvo (Equality) was issued between August 1919 and 1923, three times a month (biweekly in its first year). The newspaper's establishment was decided upon on the first congress of the BCP after it had been renamed in 1919, where the issue of the low participation of women in the party was discussed: from 34 915 members, only 563 were women (Vodenicharova and Popova 1972: 102). The central aim of the newspaper was set to be the agitation amongst women to join the party lines and to unionise. The Third Women's Conference of the same year, held in Perlovets, decided to begin the publication of *Ravenstvo.* In the first issue Kirkova explicitly states that "our mission is the mission of the Communist party, its means of struggle are our means of struggle. The goal of the Communist party is our aim." (ibid.: 103). *Ravenstvo* had various editors throughout the years of its publication. Most famously, it was under the directive of Tina Kirkova and after her (from 1920 until the end of its existence), Anna Maimunkova. They were among the most active communist organisers of the interwar period (especially amongst women) and were held in high regard throughout the state-socialist period. For most of its existence *Ravenstvo* was printed in 7000 copies (ibid.), but some issues from its last year were printed in 40 000 copies (ibid.: 114). A number of topics were covered on its pages, ranging from women's working conditions and organised struggle to reports about the USSR which was painted as a utopia for working women in the process of being built. There are many detailed accounts of the social policies introduced after the October Revolution, especially ones related to the socialisation of childcare and common kitchens, "these first sprouts of women's actual emancipation" (ibid.).

Rabotnichka (Woman Worker) was issued weekly from August 1924-1925 and from 1929 to 1934. It was a direct successor of *Ravenstvo* (Vodenicharova and Popova 1972: 164) and was the primary periodical engaged with 'enlightenment' work and agitating amongst women (ibid.). At first it was issued in 1500 copies and by 1934 this number had grown to 6000 (ibid.: 168). Its editors were initially Tina Kirkova and Ana Maimunkova once again, this time working as co-editors. The first issue states the goal of the newspaper in an introductory article called "No one is thinking about the toiling women". The newspaper's self-stated aim was "the protection of the woman worker, the woman peasant, the poor housewife and their cultural enlightenment" (ibid.: 165). After the bombing of the St. Nedelya church in April 1925 the publication was suspended. Ana Maimunkova's life also ended in the brutal repressions of communists which followed, she was tortured and killed in the Sofia prison (ibid.). When the Communist Party re-emerged as a legal entity under the name of the Workers' party (February 1927 [ibid.: 151]), the publication of *Rabotnichka* by the Central Women's Committee adjacent to the Workers' Party, resumed in January 1929 with a new editorial team[10]. This time there was a more detailed aim described in the first issue:

> "The newspaper exists for the women workers, the women peasants with little or no property, for the housewives; and it will write about their pains, struggles, demands; it will enlighten them, organise them and call them to struggle for the protection of the class interests of all working women from towns and villages; for the removal of the anti-people laws, for complete and unconditional amnesty, against new wars, for unity amongst the working women of the towns and villages, against the poverty, exploitation and their lack of rights." (ibid.).

[10] Dona Bogatinova (responsible for the *Zhenotdel* at the Central Committee of the party, Nevena Popova, Vanya Dimitrova-Dragova, Lyuba Dramalieva-Kodzheykova, Stefana Bakalova, Zheyna Piskova and others (ibid.: 166). From 1931 the main editor was Renata Jacques Natan.

Indeed, *Rabotnchka* covers a wider scope of issues than *Ravenstvo*. It provided space for personal accounts and also engages with a wide range of issues which are not directly linked with women's situations in their workplaces: such as the situation of political prisoners at home and abroad or new reactionary laws and policies being voted in parliament. Furthermore, while *Ravenstvo* had a more didactic tone and one which doesn't change much from article to article, *Rabotnichka* featured more nuanced accounts of women workers' experiences, and a wider range of writing styles. Issuing *Rabotnichka* was a dangerous business: the editors didn't have their own space but met in secret in the party club in Sofia, almost all authors preferred to stay anonymous because of the climate of intense political repression. In the last period of its existence, the newspaper couldn't be issued without first getting the approval of the police directorate, where it was often confiscated or delayed several weeks or months; and the editors would sometimes get arrested and sued (ibid.: 167). It was also the case that when editors or contributors to *Rabotnichka* were arrested or imprisoned, organised women workers would stand up for them and protest, demanding their release (ibid.). It is thus arguable that the newspaper managed to create a community of women in solidarity with one another revolving around the publication, even if it was imaginably not a very big one.

3. Feminist labour history and its intersections with other fields

This thesis simultaneously explores gender relations, labour relations, communist activism, public discourse of the labour movement, and a particular national context (past and contemporary), which has meant that there is a multitude of different strands of thought which predate its potential insights. Firstly, I broadly discuss advancements within feminist labour history and global labour history. I then move on to focus on studies which discuss women's relationship with unions. Subsequently, I discuss the available literature on socialism and gender in Central and Eastern Europe; in this section I also consider how this thesis is positioned in the Bulgarian historiographical context of mainstream history and women's and gender history in particular, arguing that present-day anti-communism triggered after the transition to liberal capitalism has in the Bulgarian context seeped into historical thinking and writing about leftism and communism more generally, and not only in relation to the state socialist period. Finally, I consider some insights from the field of feminist economics which are relevant to my study and, as I propose, labour history more broadly.

3.1. Advancements in feminist labour history: Rethinking labour-related concepts

This section will concern itself with the state of the literature on women's work and gender and work more broadly, in order to identify the main advancements and strands in scholarship which are the background to the present study. Over the last 50 years, there has been a proliferation of

studies engaging with this problematic, and these have delved deep into issues of the (local and global) gendered divisions of labour; of women's experiences as workers; of women's unpaid labour in the home; of legislation around women's work; of the terminology surrounding work which is itself deeply gendered and plays a central role in shaping women's lives. Importantly, this literature has put a question mark on some of the most basic inherited assumptions about work – by arguing for the significance and primary importance of unpaid domestic labour and by posing serious questions to reified perceptions of resistance and organised struggle, amongst others. The definitions of the terms that we employ have a strong impact on how we interpret working women's written and oral memories; the presence of their voices and experiences in official archival data, as well as the silences about and around them which are just as telling about their histories as their explicit presence in documents. As Cobble has suggested, one of the most ground-shifting insights of the worldwide upsurge of feminist labor history since the 1970s has been that the constriction of traditional labor history to 'waged work' meant not only the exclusion of most women from history "but also making it impossible to understand the politics, institutions, and identities of male wage workers" (Cobble 2012: 102). The implications of this insight are numerous, one of them being the very reconsideration of the meanings and history of waged work itself. Stepping on this scholarship, in the analytical chapters of this thesis I consider the ways in which the reflections of the contributors to the periodicals perceived the genderedness of the phenomena they were observing and I discuss the role which gender played in shaping the politics of the shopfloor.

Ever since the 1970s a variety of studies, especially in the Marxist feminist vein, have pointed to the links and overlaps between capitalist production and social reproduction (Federici 2012; 2019; Gibson-Graham 1996; Hartmann 1979; Folbre 1992; 1994; James 1991), the analysis of

which points to the artificiality of the distinctions of gendered spheres "along the oppressive hierarchies of labor value that they support" (Mills 2016: 286). The topic of this thesis is a 'traditional' one – its subjects are waged labourers – but my analysis is premised precisely on these insights which take waged labour as only one of women's occupations. Chapter 5 specifically engages with the problematic of the public/private divide and discusses how the performance of 'domestic tasks' in the spaces of the warehouses and the exploitation of women workers by employers who demanded them to perform domestic labour for their households point precisely to the artificiality of the division of the private and public spheres.

Feminist historians have also traced the historical alleyways by which women's work came to be considered as of less value and as non-productive. Deborah Simonton, for example, discusses the rise to prominence of wage labour and of wage earning becoming the measure of productivity, in which context women's household chores came to be seen as non-productive (Simonton 2003: 2). By contrast, the 'uncovering' of reproductive labour as central to the production of value in capitalism and the elaboration on the ways in which capitalism works to devalue women's work and feminised labour in general, which has been spearheaded by feminist historians and gender studies scholars more generally, has led to a rethinking of some of the most central concepts in labour history, such as that of 'skill', 'value' and of course, 'labour' itself. This is especially relevant to chapter 4 of this thesis where the notions of skill and value are discussed in relation to women's writing about occurrences which are directly tied to how women's labour was being conceptualised at the time and in the given context; and to chapter 6 which is devoted to how instances of women's collective action were being evaluated by the writers themselves. Cobble (2012: 102) highlights that the reevaluation of the centrality of reproductive labour has brought a much needed focus on spaces and relations *outside* of the workplace, which are indeed an

indispensable part of the analysis of workers' experiences in the workplace and of their labour activism. "The goals of the movements built by men and women, as well as the successes and defeats of these movements, are not fully grasped without connecting the public and the private, the individual and the social, market work and family work" (Cobble 2012: 102). Cobble's assertion brings to light the variety of shifts in thinking which have taken place with the development of feminist labour history and indeed, not only have the binary oppositions demarcated by her been regarded as connected to each other, but the very premises of how they came to stand in opposition and have highly gendered connotations.

The upsurge in studies of social reproduction has not diminished interest in women's waged work which constitutes a large part of their experience: a significant number of studies is devoted to exploring women's participation in industrial labour and gendered relationships on the shopfloor (Scott and Tilly 1975; Woodcock Tentler 1982; Simonton 2003), some of which will be explored in the next section. Others, such as Eileen Boris (1994, Daniels and Boris 1991) and Marilyn Boxer (1982; 1986), have significantly contributed to our understanding of industrial homework and the historical conditions which made it a reality.

Feminist labour historians have not only pointed out the ways in which labour relations and the economy are gendered, but they have brought attention to how society's perception of women as gendered beings and dominant understandings of gender, power and status conversely shape women's experience as workers (Simonton 2003: 2). From this follows that women's and men's – experiences outside of their workplaces, such as their domestic roles and relationships with partners and family are central to understanding their contribution to the labour market (ibid.). Historically women's obligations, such as childcare and nurturing, are also determining the practice and perceptions of women's work.

When it comes to the rethinking of labour-related concepts from a perspective which takes gender into consideration, historians such as Alice Kessler-Harris (Kessler-Harris 1975; (2014 [1990]); 2007), Louise Tilly and Joan Scott (Tilly and Scott 1975; 1989; Scott 1982; 1987) among others have ever since the mid-1970s posed a serious challenge to taken-for-granted masculinist perceptions of work. One recent book which makes a significant contribution to the discussion of concepts central to labour history is *What is Work? Gender at the crossroads of home, family, and business from the early modern era to the present* (2018). The project is as ambitious as the title suggests and engages with a variety of contemporary debates about the genderedness of work in history. Several chapters tackle the 'mainstream' vocabulary of labour history (such as the dichotomy between productive and reproductive work [Pescarolo in Sarti et al 2018]), and in this sense their relevance is much broader than the confines of women's history as such. The volume has a particularly strong focus on statistical construction of women's work which has large implications about how waged work under capitalism has come to be perceived. Cristina Borderias discusses its relation to the breadwinner economy in Spain, Raffaela Sarti provides an insightful account of how women get 'hidden' in statistical data by virtue of their 'lesser' status, with reference to the case of Italy; and Margareth Lanzinger takes a genealogical approach to the conceptual separation between housework and productive labour and the variety of ways in which it has affected present-day knowledge of women's work in the past. All of these present a strong case for the necessity to to engage with the silences as well as the words of the subjects of labour history; to think of motives for keeping certain data inside/outside official archives; to contextualise and critically discuss the stated intent and multiple meanings of primary sources.

Going back to the 1970s and the first upsurge in feminist labour history, theorists associated with the 'Wages for Housework' movement have been committed to "rejecting on the one hand class subordinated to feminism and on the other feminism subordinated to class" (James in Dalla Costa and James 1975: 9) and producing relational analyses rooted in perceiving these categories as interacting with each other. This is a crucial assertion, as it warns of the possible pitfalls of focusing on *either* at the expense of the other, or prioritizing one over the other, which would lead to determinist interpretations of history. In relation to this, scholars working with the concept of intersectionality have highlighted how multiple forms of oppression, such as race, class and gender, work to produce different lived *experiences.* The aim is not to assert the primacy of one category over another but rather to explore the ways in which they interact depending on context and socio-cultural constellation.

Speaking of gendered divisions of labour and the relational nature of both gender and labour, Mary Beth Mills (2016: 285) writes about the ambiguities which might arise when gender becomes a focus of analysis in labour history. She highlights that men's and women's actual experiences of employment "may not conform easily or meaningfully to the gendered norms and identities that shape their lives in non-work settings, prompting some individuals to think about themselves, as well as about the significance of gendered differences, in new ways" (ibid.). This leads her to assert that gendered divisions of labor are highly variable processes, rather than fixed or uniform structures, which is crucial to keep in mind if the reification of certain interpretations of how gender and labour interact, and of perceptions of the categories themselves, is to be avoided.

3.2. Feminist labour history and global labour history: convergences

Labour history as a field has undergone profound transformations over the last several decades. Most prominent is perhaps the shift towards thinking labour history in a global manner which has entailed a multitude of new questions in the conversation about the history of work. In a 2012 article in the journal of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, Marcel van der Linden, whose work has greatly contributed to the development of the discipline, describes the rise of global labor history as already a distinct field (the proposition for a 'global labour history' first came in 1999 (van der Linden 2012: 61) (ibid.). For van der Linden, the shift from 'traditional labour history' signals the variety of challenges to methodological nationalism and the redefinition of the main subject of labour history, traditionally the 'classic waged industrial proletariat' who is more of an exceptional figure in the history of labour relations rather than a normative one once a global perspective is employed. He underlines that there is also a disadvantage of this concept: "Global history creates the impression that only 'big history' is included—the 'great divergence' between China and Europe, for example, or the connection between world wars and hegemonies" (van der Linden 2012: 62) whereas this is not the sole domain of the field. Global history is, in van der Linden's words, "in the first place a question of mentality" (ibid.: 63), it can include microhistory as well: a village, worksite or a family could be considered through the lens of global labour history. "To identify the big picture in small details (and vice versa, to discover microrealities in macroprocesses)—that is what it is all about!" (ibid). He further asserts that a global approach can also make a contribution to the historiography of wage laborers in the traditional sense (ibid.: 72). The broader framework which he proposes does not mean the exclusion of 'traditional' labour history topics but rather their reconsideration.

In a response paper in the same issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, Dorothy Sue Cobble poses serious questions to van der Linden's exposition of the new global history. One of her most pertinent criticisms is directed at his construction of 'traditional labor history' which renders invisible the pioneering work of women's labor history (Cobble 2012: 102). She reminds that, as discussed above, since the 1970s feminist labour historians have been devoted to shaking up perceptions of the waged industrial worker as the main subject of labour history and have been engaging in rigorous debates which van der Linden describes as having yet to be explored as if for the first time. Her critique then shifts to question van der Linden's privileging of 'commodification' as the most important form of exploitation (ibid.: 104). Indeed van der Linden chooses to define work as "the purposive production of useful objects or services" (van der Linden 2012: 66) which already excludes the whole realm of social reproduction, unless we take the whole variety of activities involved in social reproduction to be subsumed under 'purposive production of useful services'. Against his focus on commodified labour, Cobble insists that labor history should be concerned with "the multiple structures, processes, and ideologies that disadvantage workers, how workers themselves define their exploitation, and how they combine to lessen their disadvantages" (Cobble 2012: 104).

Another perspective on the relationship between feminist labour history and global labour history is to be found in Sonya Rose and Sean Brady's chapter "Rethinking Gender and Labour History" in the volume *History after Hobsbawm* (2017). O'Rose and Brady question the always-ambiguous 'working class(es)' and 'work' with reference to the British context. They underline that until recently the field was largely preoccupied with the history of unions and unionised workers and therefore with industrial labour, leaving out pretty much all other work and kinds of workers. They attend to the genderedness of this process of exclusion (whereby a huge part of

the labour performed by women comes to be excluded) and join the call for a global turn in labour history. The chapter follows the changes in labour history which have come about as a result of the rise of women's and gender history in the 1970s and 1980s and stress that far from only 'including' women in the historical narrative, the discussion of gender has shifted the ways in which both women's and men's labour is seen. They add to the critique of the private/public divide which has animated feminist debates over the last fifty years, pointing to how women's paid employment is always interrelated with 'caring' as gendered and racialised labour (Rose and Brady 2017: 243). The perceived crisis in labour history over the last few decades is discussed along with the 'usual suspects' of the cultural and linguistic turn (and by extension, gendered approaches) whose insistence on particularity, identity and use of theory are often blamed by more 'classical' labour historians for the decline of the field. O'Rose and Brady concede that there is a noticeable shift away from using the concept of class as a result of these shifts. However, they welcome its return as a reconsidered and more complex category than was recognised before which takes account of how gender and other categories are no less of a shaping force for workers' experiences than class; and that they indeed play significant roles in the creation of meanings behind 'class' itself. Rather than contributing to the demise of the field, they argue, gender has invigorated it even further (ibid.: 258). This is a point proven by the rich variety of topics which have come to be explored as a result of gender playing a more central role in the field of labour history.

3.3. Women in unions: workers' lives and labour activism, including in the tobacco industry

The initial wave of research into women's labour activism and participation in unions took place back in the 1970s and 1980s (see for example Beattie 1986; Falk 1973; Kessler-Harris 1975; 2018 [1981]; Helmbold and Schofield 1989; Milkman 1985). These studies were pivotal in bringing to light the reasons women didn't join unions *en masse*, refuting commonly held beliefs that they didn't do so simply because as women they 'naturally' didn't care about politics or their rights as workers. has recently been followed by a new series of studies into the topic. There has been an upsurge in studies into this subject over the last 15 years (Hunt 2005; Abisaab 2010; Salin 2014; Baugh-Helton 2014), as well as into women's involvement with party politics, which is also relevant here (Hunt and Worley 2004; Hunt 2009; Hannam 2010; Mayer 2018).

As can be expected, earlier gender-blind studies, which came to be challenged by this feminist research, failed to consider the genderedness of the very spaces they discussed. The fact that unions were male-dominated spaces was left out of sight, as well as the fact that their very structures (tailored to the needs and availability of men) were extremely hostile to women (Abisaab 2010; Salin 2014; Hunt 2009). Many men did not want women in their unions (some even fought for their exclusion from the workforce [Salin 2014]) and even those who did accept them often refused to accommodate their agendas so that they would address women's concerns as well (ibid.). The best case scenario was one in which women were highly active in unions and their needs and concerns were in fact part of the union's agenda, but they still didn't hold higher positions in unions and were directed by men (with very few exceptions). While these and other factors put women off unions they have consistently partaken in a multitude of actions to secure their labour rights and fight for better conditions in unions, as well as outside of them. All of

these recent insights have greatly enriched our understanding of women's relation to unions and organised struggle. They have, moreover, posed a serious critique to masculinist understandings of organised struggle and labour activism which were overwhelmingly prevalent in literature associated with the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s.

Several studies take this critique to another level by combining multiple explanatory frameworks and accounting for the experiences of working women in unions by considering a variety of factors outside of these environments themselves. One such study is Malek Abisaab's *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation* (2010) which focuses on women's labour activism at the same time as it encompasses a variety of aspects of working women's lives. The book's main focus is Lebanese women's labour militancy in the tobacco industry, from its rise in the 19th century until the 1990s. Abisaab's study manages to masterfully contextualise its subject matter in wider (and often conflicting struggles), all the while analysing the ways in which gender and class intersect in the shaping of working women's lived experience but also in the production of the meanings of the political and social struggles which circumscribe their lives. The study further regards the topic in its context of increasingly intrusive French colonialism and the politicisation of women's labour activism as their struggles become ever-more defined by the invasion of French capital and political power. Abisaab insists that "neither class nor gender constitutes an independent or exclusive source of group identity" (2010: xxiii) and consciously avoids falling into traps of causal explanations for women's behaviours, rejecting the culturalist approach of giving primacy to the factors of religion and kinship which is unfortunately often present in research on the lives of women from the Middle East. Finally, as consistent with the analytical propositions made by Joann Scott in her essay "Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis" of 1986 which has proven to be one of the most influential texts in women's and gender history, the

book regards gender as way more than an identity marker. One of the central concerns is to uncover how gender is built into the fabric of institutional power, political and everyday discourse. This particular point is relevant to the discussion surrounding women's working conditions in chapter 4, where I critique Christian de Vito's conceptualisation of labour precarity. On the one hand, Scott's insistence on gender as an always-relevant category of historical analysis serves to show the necessity of thinking through a gendered lens when discussing phenomena which at first sight might not appear gendered. Abisaiib's contention that neither class nor gender can be taken as explanatory frameworks in themselves and are always mutually-constitutive, on the other hand, highlights that they should always be considered in relation to each other. I build on their contentions to argue that precarity ought to be conceptualised in light of how power structures such as gender, race, sexuality and ability imbue it with different meanings, using the case of gender as an example.

One study which similarly addresses women's labour activisms by considering their histories in a much more wide-reaching manner is Jennifer Guglielmo's *Living the Revolution* (2010). Her book transgresses boundaries of organisational participation and women's personal lives, and dives into the world of women's everyday lives and politics. The book explores the militancy of Italian women (both in Southern Italy and of immigrants in the US). At the same time as it takes us through the history of their participation in organisations and their work in creating these, it speaks of the social connections, kinship networks and traditions of subversion and transgression which undergirded their activisms. Guglielmo works with interviews of women recorded as early as the 1920s and manages to weave them into her complex but very engaging analysis of power relations and women's agency at work and at home (the two often being one and the same space). *Living the Revolution* is extremely rich in biographical detail (and interpretation thereof)

about the women it pays tribute to. The book, finally, puts all of this rich material in the context of the intensification of racism amongst the American Italian community during the Great Depression, and manages to situate women's work relations and labour activism in the complex relationships of race and class which were swiftly changing at the time and which played a decisive role for the kinds of activism American Italian women would ultimately partake in and the kinds of solidarities which they would form with other workers. The insistence on the relationality of gender in *Living the Revolution* and Guiglielmo's view of 'women' as a multiple category, along with the focus on gender's intersections with class and racialised status in the production of identities has proved to be an extremely fruitful approach to the history of women's labour and labour activism. Engaging with her relational analysis which is at the same time rooted in a discussion of the power structures which presupposed the actions of her study's subjects was formative for my thinking about what 'women' as a multiple category meant in practice. While her research is focused on real-life experiences of women and mine on women's elaborations on their position in the class struggle in relation to men and other women, her mode of analysis provides the basis for my reflections on unorganised and organised women as discursively separated groups.

In the final part of this section, I will focus on historical writing concerning the tobacco industry or tobacco workers more concretely (concerning different historical moments and geographical locations). Recently, there have been quite a few studies exploring this topic, also providing a gendered account of labour relations on the shopfloor and beyond.

There are several articles published on this topic from the Swedish (Stanfors et al 2014), Spanish (Galvez-Munoz 1997), Ottoman (Balsoy 2009; Nacar 2014) and Greek (Betas 2016) contexts all reflecting on different time periods (but broadly between the end of the 19th century and the

middle of the 20th) and different aspects of industrial work. These address a myriad of questions relevant to all industrial labour, an example of which is the role of mechanisation in the changing divisions of labour in the interwar period (Betas 2016) and its effects on male and female experiences of the tobacco factory as a workplace. These articles highlight important differences and similarities in the gendering of industrial work. One example is the revalorization of different kinds of work as a result of mechanization in the industry which occurs through the simultaneous shifting of gendered meanings of labour. In the Greek context, the majority of tasks, irrespective of their nature, came to be performed by women, whilst in the Ottoman case, some specifically male jobs appeared with the intensified introduction of technology in the workplace. In both instances, however, the new divisions of labour led to the discursive construction of some types of labour as 'skilled' and others as 'unskilled', and what labour classified as either depended on whether it was carried out by men or women. The contextual differences between the Ottoman and the Greek cases, furthermore point to the instability of gender as a category and the arbitrariness of assigning its meanings which comes to be naturalized when only looked at in its own context and not in a comparative framework. I second the points about the arbitrary but gendered assignment of value to certain kinds of labour in Chapter 4 in my discussion of precarious labour, as well as Laura Lee Downs' reflections on the construction of skill in industrial labour more broadly (Downs 1995).

A work which I necessarily have to refer to here is Mary Neuburger's book *Balkan Smoke* (2013) – the only in-depth study of the world of tobacco in Bulgaria, the Balkans and in Eastern Europe more generally. *Balkan Smoke* provides important context for my study and also makes visible a lot of the gaps in historical writing in the region. The book addresses a wide array of issues from a cross-disciplinary perspective. Neuburger's narrative approach follows the history of tobacco

in Bulgaria through some of the many contexts which it influenced or co-created and her writing transgresses the boundaries of historical schools. Whilst very engaging and informative about the history of tobacco itself, however, the book doesn't focus on the process of production and the people implicated in it, and neither is there a gender perspective (except for in the analysis of the gendered accessibility of smoking spaces). As the only focused study concerning the tobacco industry in post-1989 historiography, *Balkan Smoke* raises as many questions as it answers. The history of production, and factory and warehouse work in particular, constituting a crucial part in the rise of industrialisation in Bulgaria, is a big gap in the literature.

3.4. Central and Eastern European Labour and Gender History

Feminist labour history in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been a growing field over the last few decades, as interest in issues of gender and labour has risen internationally but also in relation to the particularities of post-socialist contexts. Exploring this contemporary literature in the region is particularly interesting for several reasons, among them being the specific attitudes towards issues of labour formed in the aftermath of state socialism and the rise of local anti-communism in many national contexts after 1989. As Daskalova and Zimmermann argue in their chapter "Women's and Gender History" (2017), work has been a central interest in gender historiography with a focus on East Central Europe (2017: 283). When it comes to the region, perhaps this is specifically so also because of its state-socialist history, given the centrality of labour in socialist and communist thought which informed (albeit in very contradictory ways) state governance, and the specific place of women as workers in communist projects. When discussing the state socialist period in particular, one feature of most of the literature is the

frequent explicit focus on the role of the state in women's lives – a particularity not so present in studies of Western contexts. External forces, whether they be the state or agents of capital, have had no less impact on women's lives in the capitalist West than in state-socialist countries. Observing this trend makes it arguable that this uneven distribution of attention to this problematic can be interpreted as a divide of national and regional historiographies inherited from Cold War perceptions of the differences between the East and the West which continues to produce knowledge about these regions as essentially different from one another. However, in the last few years there have been studies which challenge precisely this phenomenon.

A recent book which is especially pertinent to the issue of knowledge production about and in post-socialist contexts is Chiara Bonfiglioli's *Women and Industry in the Balkans. The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Textile Sector* (2019). In this book, she proposes a masterful gendered account of the industry's rise and decline, from its beginnings in the interwar period to the radical changes in people's lives after Yugoslavia's breakup. Her study is based on oral history interviews and archival material, but it also involves analysis of popular culture such as TV series and films from the period pertaining to the topic. Her book, she writes, has the particular aim of demonstrating that "the study of socialist gender politics in Yugoslavia needs to go beyond existing interpretations which tend to emphasize state control over women and women's lack of agency" (Bonfiglioli 2019: 8). Her study makes apparent the uneven focus on the role of the state in women's lives in literature on Eastern Europe as compared to the West pointed at above, at the same time as it shifts the attention to micro-social interactions and dynamics, as well as women's subjectivities and experiences. Finally, the time span of the book, from the interwar era to post-socialism, is in itself a choice which disturbs the extremely reified and ideologised view of state socialism as a period which has little to do with what came before or

after it. The focus on *industrialisation* rather than a particular time period serves to greatly enrich our understanding of both women's experiences and institutionalised power.

Other studies which contribute to this trend of critically reassessing the socialist past are Donna Harsch's *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (2007), Malgorzata Fidelis's *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (2010), Jill Massino's *Ambiguous Transitions: Gender, the State, and Everyday Life in Socialist and Postsocialist Romania* (2019) and Marsha Siefert's edited volume *Labor in State-Socialist Europe, 1945-1989* (2020). This kind of research has the capacity to bring to light the polyphony of voices involved in these histories which are highly politicised in post-1989 scholarship; to discuss the contradictions and contestations which define them, without losing sight of the role of institutionalised power, it rather enriches its analysis. There are a number of valuable studies pertaining to this topic written in the native languages of the countries in question (For the Bulgarian context, see Yancheva 2011; Rangelova 2011; Vladimirova 2011). An extensive historiography of the field would be very beneficial for future research. This new scholarship signals a certain shift in the thinking about women in the state-socialist world and the consideration of state socialism itself. The first years after 1989 were in many ex-socialist states marked by a 'memory boom' reminiscent of the one in the West from a few decades earlier (and continuing ubiquitously until today), which took the form of a proliferation of memoirs being published, most of which were of people for whom the years of state socialism had been a negative experience; of state archives becoming open to the public and of dossiers getting declassified. Research into labour and gender during socialism did not necessarily take part in this phenomenon, as the local fields of women's and gender history were themselves just emerging. While focusing on the state socialist period, this discussion is highly relevant to this

thesis in terms of what it aims to achieve politically. As I argue in the following section, the proliferation of anti-communist sentiments in the Bulgarian public sphere has seeped beyond political and media discourse into academia as well. I argue that this has meant that issues of labour in a historical perspective have tendentiously been avoided in post-1989 scholarship, in relation to the state socialist period *as well as* the period which preceded it. With this thesis, I aim to interrupt the prevalent silence about the history of labour as well as about leftist politics, which has been an even more marginalised topic.

A focus on CEE labour history is also crucial when thinking about global labour history as a project partly instigated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the transition to liberal capitalism of other socialist states. As van der Linden observes, the interest in 'world history' (and, a little later, 'global history') began to increase in the 1990s, it was probably in good part due to the collapse of 'really existing socialism', as "the need for a reorientation of labor and working-class history was felt more and more, including within the North Atlantic region" (van der Linden 2012: 59). At the same time, as Grama and Zimmermann (2017: 1) have highlighted, the history of labour in Eastern Europe still constitutes one of the least-globalized research topics in the field.

3.5. The case of Bulgaria: feminist labour history gone missing

In relation to the Bulgarian context, it appears safe to say that there is no field of feminist labour history as such. Bulgarian women's and gender history is preoccupied with the lives of famous and upper-class women, the history of education and the professions. There are no post-1989

studies of working-class women before state socialism and only Krassimira Daskalova has engaged with the topic of leftist women's activism (Daskalova 2016). I would argue that the anti-communism prevalent not only in media and political discourse has seeped into academia as well. This topic has not been the subject of academic analysis. However, one trend which I would argue justifies this suggestion is the much wider debate among mainstream historians concerning the nature of political rule during the interwar period. Starting in the early 1990s, this debate has involved a growing number of historians rejecting the association of pre-1944 Bulgaria with fascism and insisting that interpretations of tsarist Bulgaria as extremely right-wing are entirely the fruit of communist propaganda (Daskalov 2011) while there is more than enough evidence to suggest that this is not the case (Daskalov 2005; 2011; Kalinova and Baeva 2010). I would suggest that the tendency to vilify state socialism in post-1989 historiography which was quite overt in the 1990s and is now perhaps more visible in the avoidance of certain topics has also seeped into the preceding period where topics of labour and workers' struggles are generally avoided by historians because of their association with leftism. This thesis aims to start filling in this large gap in contemporary Bulgarian historical literature by taking on the writings of working-class women as its central object of analysis and bringing to the fore part of the myriad questions in relation to working-class and labour history in Bulgaria which are yet to be explored.

3.6. Feminist thought beyond history: Insights from Feminist Economics

Feminist economics has, since its emergence as a discipline in the 1990's (Kuiper 2015: 214), drawn attention to a myriad of issues within mainstream economics. Scholars and activists have discussed issues and concerns which had previously been nearly completely invisibilised by the dominant Western-centric, masculinist discourse of economics. The exclusion of non-market activities from the field of economics has been facing serious critique; and the hidden assumptions of mainstream economics have been put under scrutiny. Unpaid care work, global gendered divisions of labour, the role of affect in the economy, the role of power relations, the critique of *homo economicus*, are only a few of many topics which have been brought to the fore by scholars in the field. Feminist labour history and feminist economics have a lot in common and their contributions often cannot be neatly separated into one field or the other. They are still, however, distinct fields with specific interests (albeit ones which often overlap). The aim of this section is to propose some ways in which labour history could benefit from engaging with feminist economists' work. How can feminist understandings of economic processes and the economy enrich the work of labour historians? How can labour historians' interpretive work benefit from concepts elaborated on by feminist economists? These questions are especially relevant to this thesis in relation to the discussion of women's precarity which follows. While I do not quote this literature in my analysis, it is precisely the work done by feminist economists in reconsidering the nature of the economy which undergirds my proposition for the reconceptualisation of precarity on the basis of how power structures shape its constitution.

One of the biggest achievements of feminist economics has been to destabilise and unpack conventional patriarchal understandings of what the economy consists of and what counts as economics. Feminist economists have integrated notions of relatedness, duty, and responsibility

into explanations of economic behavior and conceptualizations of the economy (Barker and Kuiper 2003: 12). Scholars in the field further conceive of economics in "far richer and more visionary ways than the neoclassical paradigm allows" (ibid.: 3). This involves the conceptualisation of economics itself as a social institution: "it is an integral part of culture, of power relations, and of change" (ibid.). Barker and Kuiper highlight that "economics is not an abstract notion; it does not exist without people" (ibid.). The insights which follow from such a view of economics and the economy could have big implications for labour historians, as culture, power relations and change are indeed part of the domain of labour history.

The argument for viewing economics as a social institution described above can be extended to the contention that economics reaches far beyond the realm of the regulation of strictly economic affairs: not only does the economy involve a multitude of processes which mainstream economics pushes into the background, but *economic thinking* itself is present on every level of societal life and social interaction. Paying analytical attention to the fact that dominant economic models are a shaping force for human thinking at any given point in time can be immensely helpful in answering questions about subjects' intentionality; scope of imagination and scope of possibility for action. This is also relevant for the discussion in chapter 4 where I argue that gendered power relations and economic ones are mutually constitutive.

Furthermore, feminist economists have argued that rather than an abstract set of principles which somehow guide our social reality from without, economics is an ever-in-motion state of affairs implicated in global politics as much as in local phenomena and importantly, individual experience as well. The economy and economics are always embodied (Gibson-Graham et al 2013: 3); reliant upon our labour and our very bodies, as well as on the natural world which circumscribes them. In her most recent book, Silvia Federici argues that "from the earliest phase

of its development to the present, to force people to work at the service of others, whether the work was paid or unpaid, capitalism has had to restructure the entire process of social reproduction, remolding our relation not only to work but also to our sense of identity, to space and time, and to our social and sexual life" (Federici 2020: 77). Such a contention has far-reaching consequences for the production of labour history. It points to layers of human existence and experience which are rarely addressed by scholars in the field with economic reasoning in mind; layers which are in fact crucial for reconstructing the political and economic contexts of the past.

In chapter 4 of this thesis, I consider the ways in which the constitution of precarity and the experience of precariousness are contingent upon the roles played by gender and other notions imbricated in power structures, which in turn shift the definitions of precarity and precariousness depending on who is experiencing them. My contention is based precisely on a wider perception of the economy as a social institution which operates *through* the subjects whose lifepaths it delimits. The other side of the argument that the economy is in fact continuously brought into being by the people who partake in it is that people's experiences are definitive of the constitution of the economy. Based on this insight, I argue that precarity needs to be conceptualised in relation to factors outside of the economic realm in the traditional sense (as having to do with financial matters and issues related to the labour market exclusively), such as the categories of gender, race, sexuality and others.

Furthermore, as Federici argues, discourses do not (re)produce themselves (a point of discussion often avoided by postmodern and post-structuralist theorists). They are, rather, "an integral part of economic and political planning and the resistances it generates. Indeed, we could write a history of the disciplines – of their paradigm shifts and innovations – from the viewpoint of the

struggles that have motivated their course" (ibid.). This last point is in fact what a lot of gender-sensitive labour historians contribute to in one way or another. Research which focuses on bringing to light the history of women's participation in the labour force; working women's complicated relationships to trade unions (and their genderedness as a whole); accounts of working women's relationships and struggles outside of waged labour: the writing of these histories is always an account of how bottom-up discourse formation happens. The exploration of these topics, the writing of these histories is always an account of how bottom-up discourse formation happens, but within labour history the links of those to dominant (or subversive) economic paradigms are almost never a focus in itself. While I do not aim at reconstructing economic discourses with this thesis, I consider the discussion of women's working conditions to be partly working in such a direction.

Such interactions on the side of labour history with feminist economics could help scholars go deeper into their material by exploring *why it made sense* for men and women to believe what they did and to undertake the (strategic) actions they did. Asking questions of intent would involve a critical engagement both with the roles played by the immediate actors involved in upholding oppressive/exclusionary systems and practices (asking what *they* might/could have done differently rather than asking why women weren't active) and with the ways in which all actors embody economic modes of reasoning *and* economic practices which are commonly not recognised as such. Such work would advance our understanding of how capitalism and male domination operate and have operated in tandem throughout the last few centuries. The formulation and addressing of such questions would rely on consciously working with an expanded definition of both the economy and economics as elaborated by feminist economists.

4. Working conditions and the state of precarity for women in the tobacco industry

In this first analytical chapter I will focus on my findings related to women's working conditions, and authors' perceptions of these, as present in the articles which are the object of this study. I attempt to reconstruct the environments which they inhabited as wage labourers, the conditions upon which they were employed and fired, and some of the everyday challenges they faced. There are some secondary sources which discuss this topic in relation to the Bulgarian context (for example Calaora 1955; Michev 1972). However, this has so far been done in a fragmentary manner, as part of discussions of the wider condition of the working class or working women (all of these were published during state socialism). There are no studies in which women tobacco workers are at the centre of the analysis, and some important aspects which come through in a reading of the newspapers have not been touched upon in secondary literature.

What stands out most clearly in the description of women's waged labour in the articles considered here, even if it is often not the central concern which they themselves put forward, is the extreme job insecurity which they face and the multiplicity of factors upon which it is predicated. Whether it is the seasonal nature of their jobs or the fact that they received threats of being fired and indeed got fired for unjustifiable reasons, women tobacco workers led lives of extreme precarity, even more so than their male counterparts, precisely because of the ways in which they were gendered (and sexed). In this chapter, I consider the articles engaging with this subject matter in light of available conceptualisations of precarity and precariousness. I propose a definition of precarity which puts power relations centre-stage. I argue that the lack of attention paid to gender as a structuring force in labour relations has led to definitions of precarity and precariousness which obscure some of the fundamental characteristics of the phenomena in

question. I argue that the experiences of women workers challenge available definitions of precarity in that the precariousness of their waged labour is contingent upon their treatment *as* women – what we consider to be defining features of the experience precarity (unstable and insecure work) for the subjects of this study become manifested through the ways in which they are treated based on their perceived womanhood.

4.1. Precarity as a historical and gendered concept

In this first part I will consider the notions of precarity and precariousness and particularly their conceptualisations which are most relevant to my study and which I will then work into the analysis of the primary sources in the second part of the chapter. I propose that precarity and precariousness need to be reconceptualised in light of the gendered nature of the phenomena they describe which seems to remain largely undiscussed. Apart from arguing, along with a number of labour historians, that precarity needs to be historicised and therefore that it is the historical norm rather than a recent phenomenon, I argue that present understandings of precarity and precariousness don't take into account gender power relations which are decisive for the experience of precariousness and the constitution of precarity.

The concepts of precarity and precariousness gained currency in the early 2000s, particularly in association with the rise of part-time contracts and the decline of the welfare state in many Western countries. Precarity and precariousness are commonly associated with the unpredictability, insecurity and instability of one's experience as a worker (Standing 2011; Kasmir 2018), although precariousness has also been conceptualised as a generalised ontological experience not explicitly tied to labour (Butler 2004). Precarity is conceptualised primarily in

economic terms (Neilson and Rossiter 2008: 51) although scholars have also suggested that it needs to be seen also as a source of political subjection (Lazzarato 2004) and critiques have been posed from the perspectives of gender (McRobbie 2010; Peterson 2013; Betti 2016) and post-colonial studies (Scully 2016). The conceptualisation of precarity as a new, contemporary phenomenon characteristic of post-Fordism is famously associated with the work of Guy Standing and his elaboration of the notion of the 'precariat' (Standing 2011). In his view the contemporary condition of precariousness of residency, of labour and work and of social protection (ibid.: 3) is formative of a new class and constitutive of a political subjectivity distinct from ones existent in the past. This view of precarity has received critique from multiple scholars and has stirred a lot of debate (Scully 2016; Wright 2016; Campbell and Price 2016; Betti 2016). Labour historians in particular have insisted that precarity and precariousness need to be historicised – according to many, precarity is the rule, rather than the exception, and it is the working conditions under Fordism and the welfare state that are the exception (De Vito 2017). Precarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm (Neilson and Rossiter 2008: 54). The association of Fordism with labour protection itself has been questioned by some scholars (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). It has been pointed out that there was only a very brief period of convergence between centralised union organising and Keynesian welfare systems, and Fordism as a whole was characterised by authoritarian labour control which built on Taylorist techniques. These included starting to heavily rely on armed security guards, shop floor spies, physical intimidation and external propaganda which were "methods to cut workers' contact with their peers and bind their labour to a pre-ordained tempo set by the factory's machinery" (ibid.: 56). Labour historian Feruccio Gambino turns the common understanding of Fordism on its head by arguing that Fordism was in fact *eliminated* as a mode

of labour organisation precisely thanks to the struggles for industrial unionism in the United States in the 1930's (in ibid.).

The conceptualisation which I will consider here the most closely is that of Christian De Vito, a labour historian who is deeply invested in the notion of precariousness, also insists on a *longue duree* perspective on precarity which sees it as the norm rather than an exception (De Vito 2017). He proposes a relational long-term perspective on precariousness which "opposes the standard idea of labour flexibility/precariousness as a recent phenomenon, allegedly emerging in the 1970s as a consequence of the birth of 'post-industrial' society and 'neoliberal globalisation'" (ibid.: 238). For him, labour precariousness and labour flexibility are complementary concepts: he defines labor precariousness as "the workers' own perception of their lack of control over their labor power in relation to other workers, the labor market, and the social reproduction of their workforce" (De Vito 2017: 233) and labour flexibility as "the relative advantage attached by employers and policy-makers to certain labour relations, based on the opportunity to recruit, locate and manage workforces in the place, time and task most conducive to the former's own economic and political goals" (ibid.: 219). He highlights that there are many contradictory definitions of these phenomena in scholarship – for him the advantage of his reconceptualisation is the connecting of labour flexibility/precariousness to the issue of control over labour: "they indicate how labour flexibility relates to external (employers' and/or policy-makers') control over the workforce, whereas labour precariousness relates to workers' control over their own labour force" (ibid.). Labour flexibility/precariousness thus become relational concepts not conflated with specific types of labour relations, but foregrounding the conflict between workers and employers/policy makers around the question of control over the workforce (ibid.: 220). While De Vito's work presents one of the most novel and up-to-date conceptualisations of

precarity and precariousness, he only pays cursory attention to the structuring force of gender and other structures of oppression. According to De Vito, the definitions of labour flexibility/precariousness which he puts forward combine the structural and perceived aspects of flexibility and precariousness, place them within the process of both the production and reproduction of the workforce, i.e. "within and beyond the labour process, for example by taking issues such as gender and ethnicity into full consideration" (ibid.). Gender, ethnicity (and other constructs), however, do not figure as a societal construct which in any way influences how precarity is understood or experienced, while they are, I argue, central to how precariousness operates.

I therefore argue that precarity/precariousness are to be conceptualised through the consideration of power structures. Neilson and Rossiter's work is an example of an attempt to put forward a revised concept of precarity which centers ontological experience as well as a socio-economic condition. They argue for a broad definition of precarity which goes beyond economistic approaches (Neilson and Rossiter 2008: 54). They consider Judith Butler's understanding of precariousness which she sees as associated with the broader vulnerability and susceptibility to injury of humans (ibid.: 58). Butler draws a crucial dividing line between precarity as an unequally distributed experience of economic insecurity and precariousness as a generalised ontological experience emerging from the inescapable interdependency of all people which creates a condition of vulnerability. She sees potential for emancipation in embracing the common circumstance of precariousness, as against the unequal fate of precarity (Kasmir 2018), or, in other words, precariousness as the basis for a common political project for emancipation based on people's experience of their interconnectedness rather than shared experience of precarity. Neilson and Rossiter weave into their own conceptualisation of precarity the political

charge of precariousness theorised by Butler and ultimately argue that precarity is both an ontological experience and a socio-economic condition with multiple registers (Neilson and Rossiter 2008: 55) which encompasses a range of experiences whose differences need to be recognised. It thus brings differences into relation (ibid.: 60) and can be useful in defining a common political project across labouring bodies (ibid.: 61).

By demanding that precarity be seen as an ontological experience, Neilson and Rossiter's article opens up space for the invocation of the role of structures of domination in how we think of precarity and precariousness. Unfortunately, however, they do not enter such a discussion and their proposal remains on the plane of finding common grounds among groups who experience precarity differently, without getting into what the contents of precarity are taken to be. The only mention of gender in Neilson and Rossiter's article is the indication that gender figured as part of the debates in the mid-2000s when some scholars insisted on the importance of the affective labour of female migrant care workers (ibid.: 59).

I would argue that both their text and De Vito's avoid the issue of the genderedness of the concepts of precarity and precariousness themselves by not questioning the received characteristics of these concepts, which has consequences for the vocabulary labour historians continue to use. Importantly, De Vito's definitions open up new ways of thinking about the history of labour which allow for the breaking down of preconceived notions about the nature of labour relations precisely because of their relationality. His proposition is based on a binary opposition (labour flexibility/labour precariousness) which considers the perceptions and perceptiveness of different actors. This in itself is laudable, as having actors' subjective positions as the starting point of the analysis is rarely the case (Barchiesi 2012: 80). However, I would argue that his conceptualisation in fact hinders an analysis of structures which precondition

actors' behavior and is in this sense functionalist in ways which would indeed make it difficult to take issues such as gender into full consideration. I argue that the labour flexibility/precariousness binary does not exhaust the matter of control over the workforce (as De Vito seems to suggest) by missing out on the actual state of precarity which would appear to stand in the middle between the two: as the effect of employers' and policymakers' efforts at controlling the workforce on the workforce. Following from this, the workforce not only experiences and perceives (relative, subjectively-defined) precariousness but also lives in a condition of precarity defined by other factors than employers' "quest to synchronise the availability of what they perceive as the most appropriate workforce, with their productive and political needs" (de Vito 2017: 219). Their precarity is contingent on factors which far exceed economic considerations, all the while being inextricably connected to those.

What all of these authors seem to do is take the core of the concepts of precarity and precariousness at face value, as *neutral*, and hence bypass the fact that they themselves are gendered concepts. Conceptualised in these ways, the notions only encompass what is experienced by both men and women, thus prioritising male experience. The centering of experiences which are common to both men and women in the conceptualisation of a phenomenon which is deeply gendered and whose meaning is contingent upon multiple systems of oppression implies that precarity is a phenomenon exclusively tied to economic considerations. Women's experience of precarity, which is predicated on male domination as well as economic oppression (the latter closely interlinked with the first) therefore becomes obscured. The rest of this chapter will discuss the working conditions of women workers in the tobacco industry as present in the articles under examination, and, through examples, will challenge these reified notions of precarity and argue for the reconceptualisation of both

precarity and precariousness – rooting them in their relationship to labour while making their genderedness a central concern. Related to gender but not only is also the issue of the intentionalities of people 'in the middle' of labour relations, such as foremen and managers, which do not seem to easily fit within De Vito's framework, and whose actions are often not motivated by economic rationales, but can be decisive in instituting precarious conditions for workers, as will also become visible in the following section.

In the analysis which follows, I focus on women's working conditions and highlight the role which gender played in shaping them. I take 'working conditions' to encompass a broad range of issues – from the material conditions in a workspace and the rate of pay and working hours, to how workers are being treated by employers and the extent to which a certain employment relationship affects the worker's capacity for life beyond paid employment. I do not take the conditions which I describe to apply to women only: especially the material conditions in which workers were made to work apply to all employees of the factories, be they men, women or children. However, the articles which I discuss often make reference to how women in particular inhabited these spaces and how they related to their working conditions more broadly. Articles which describe working conditions abound in *Tiutiunorabotnik, Ravenstvo* and *Rabotnichka* alike. There are a number of lengthy, as well as short articles for which this is the main focus, and often the fact of the horrible conditions in which women have to work are what is used to instigate a call for action. Generally, as asserted both by historians and by women workers themselves, women along with children tended to suffer much heavier exploitation than that of men. It is through the analysis of these articles that I will connect the multiple facets of their exploitation to the gendered aspects of precariousness and precarity which usually remain out of sight.

4.2. Material conditions in the factories

Conditions in tobacco factories and warehouses in Bulgaria were notoriously bad. While in France, for example, this was one of the industries which provided better working conditions in that period in comparison to others, as the industry was state-owned (Salin 2014), in Bulgaria tobacco workers were some of the most badly exploited ones.

An article by a woman worker which describes the ways in which the Law for Hygiene and Safety of Labour is largely bypassed by factory owners[11] stresses that most warehouses don't even have toilets and basic hygiene and cleanliness around the workshops can't be maintained; and wherever there are any, there are very few of them. In the *Pashoolu* factory in Stara Zagora there were no ventilators, and the writer reports that women could barely breathe or speak in the mornings. Their feet were blue from the cold during winter, and they were using books for the heater because they were only given 5 pieces of wood a day[12]. There had been talk of installing modern ventilators for a long time, but those kept not appearing. More than 150 workers worked together in a salon with this bad air[13]. In the *Sultanie* factory in Sofia 50 to 60 people worked in the same crowded room. The level of hygiene was extremely low and the heating – terrible[14]. In the *Austrian Regie*, one of the biggest tobacco exporters in the 1930's, around 300 women workers were employed in 1931. The toilets were right next to the window of the salon which was already full of poisonous fumes – the smell used to be unbearable. The ventilators were never turned on because the firm was 'poor'. For all 300 women there were only four water cups

[11] *Ravenstvo* III (24) (1 April 1922), p. 3-4
[12] *Rabotnichka* IV (19) (date illegible, May 1932), p. 3
[13] *Ravenstvo* III (34) (10 July 1922), p. 3
[14] *Ravenstvo* III (20) (20 February 1922), p. 3

(*kancheta*)[15]. A few months later, another article from *Rabotnichka* reported that the level of hygiene in the *Austrian Regie* was getting progressively worse.

> "Not only do we breathe the poisonous tobacco dust all day, but on top of this we drink stagnated water which is kept in vessels that haven't been washed since who knows when. There is a doctor but he never asked or checked what water we are given to drink. There is a ventilator but they only turn it on when they know that the doctor is coming"[16].

A number of other articles along with these discuss the horrible material conditions in the factories and warehouses which were often the primary reason workers would get ill. Little to nothing changed throughout the period, as can be seen from the fact that the same issues are being discussed in 1919 and 1932. The following sections will exhibit the situations of women workers in these environments, as wage labourers and people treated in a gendered manner. These material conditions are the backdrop against which interactions among women workers and their higher-ups as well as male colleagues took place and were often a decisive trigger for their (formal and informal) collective acts of standing up to factory owners. These conditions are therefore important not only as background but also as a reason for mobilisation – in which they are inextricably connected to issues of the exploitation of women's labour and of receiving insufficient protection from the state.

[15] *Rabotnichka* IV (30) (26 July 1932), p. 4
[16] *Rabotnichka* IV (40) (13 December 1932), p. 4

4.3. Low and inconsistent pay

As soon as the Bulgarian tobacco industry started expanding in the second half of the 1900s (Neuburger 2013: 68-9), women and children started making up a larger and larger percentage of the workforce precisely because their labour was easier to exploit. While in 1900 only 10 percent of tobacco workers were women, by 1908 they were averaging 70 percent (ibid.: 69). In 1910 only 21.6 percent of tobacco workers were men, and 56.4 percent of all workers were under eighteen (ibid.) which remained relatively the same throughout the interwar period as well. Women's much lower pay as compared to men's was intimately tied to dominant understandings of skill which were conceptualised so as to privilege traditionally male occupations and tasks; and separations of 'skilled' and 'unskilled' labour were commonly used to justify women's much lower wages. Moreover, what 'skilled' jobs consisted of shifted over time depending on the needs of capital and the available workforce – women and children were paid a fraction of what men had formerly made in the same jobs (Neuburger 2013: 68-9). "Because many phases of tobacco processing and cigarette rolling were considered light work, women and children made up an ever-larger percentage of the workforce in the years of industry expansion" (ibid.). Masculinist notions of skill, however, were not necessarily challenged by left-wing activists themselves. In an article from 1921, there is a long description of the conditions in tobacco factories for women workers. In an attempt to explain how women had come to be paid much less than men, an interesting take on skill is presented:

> "Tobacco-related work is not as complicated and difficult, like work in other industries, which is why women perform it better and with more agility and skill than men, this is why masters prefer them and pay them less, as they are 'without consciousness' (*nesuznatelni*) and unorganised"[17].

What is fascinating about this statement is that it manages in one sentence to maintain the arguments that women's work is easy and that it is *therefore* performed better by women than men, its 'simplicity' justifying its lower remuneration. There is an implicit recognition that this work is not in fact 'easy', if it requires agility and skill, but the dominant understanding of work performed by men as more valuable is still upheld, even if it contradicts the rest of what the author is saying. Here, a masculinist notion, that of skill, is used to justify women's lower pay – that this is indeed a mechanism of devaluing women's work is not questioned even by the writer who advocates for working women's higher pay and ultimate liberation from capitalism. Women's lower pay was a condition for the precariousness of their lives – their lower wages meant that they could not be the main providers for themselves or financially provide for their family units in a comparable way to men, which was rarely posed as an issue by leftists. To employ De Vito's conceptualisation of precariousness as "the workers' own perception of their lack of control over their labor power in relation to other workers, the labor market, and the social reproduction of their workforce" (De Vito 2017: 16) would miss out on the fact that women's precariousness extended (and continues to extend) well beyond their perceived relationship to their labour power. The explanation of why women receive lower wages given by the article's author to an extent *justifies* women's lower wages because of the lower value she attaches to the kind of labour they perform. Women's precariousness (the author's

[17] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (7) (28 February 1921), p. 3

precariousness included), which is in part constituted precisely by their lower wages, is contingent upon gendered constructions of labour value which are beyond the author's perception. To construe her precariousness as, firstly, a state that is necessarily *perceived*, and secondly, as necessarily tied to one's (lack of) control over one's labour power therefore is to bypass both the role of dominant discourses in shaping meanings and the roles played by phenomena which are not explicitly tied to labour in the constitution of labour relations.

Not only was women tobacco workers's pay extremely low, it was also highly insecure. Factory owners would often pay workers less than they were due, they would keep track of workers' hours in books to which the workers had no access[18] and they would end up getting paid less than they'd worked for at the end of the week. In May 1922, for example, a 100 lv was taken from Tinka Stoyanova's wages in an unscrupulous manner. She had taken a 500 lv advance at an earlier point, and she had the right to slowly repay it. Since November, they started taking 100 lv from her wages every two weeks, but after the first two times they started taking 200 lv and writing down 100 lv in the books[19].

Whether a woman would get paid at the end of the day/week could also depend on whether she had done her job well enough according to the owner's or foreman's own understanding. For example, the article *Kalamandi's Factory*[20] discusses in detail the workday of women workers employed. The eight female workers in the cigarette boxing department have, the article states, a male supervisor who coerces them to stay after their working hours to finish the 800 boxes he wants them to have by the end of the working day. They are not paid their full weekly wages

[18] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 4
[19] *Ravenstvo* III (19) (10 February 1922), p. 3
[20] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (21-22) (15 October 1921), p. 6

because of a variety of reasons which have nothing to do with their actual work – for example, some of the boxes came undone because of the high temperature in the factory and the glue couldn't dry up properly – for this all of them lost a day's wages. The next week they were paid half their wages with no explanation, the third their wages were significantly reduced because what they produced ended up being more than the owner could sell and this is what he thought was the best way to make up for his losses. Finally, after working for free for a day and a half, they were fired.

Here, once again, we see that women's precarious condition was largely defined by how they were treated by their higher-ups. The conceptualisation of labour flexibility as "the relative advantage attached by employers and policy-makers to certain labour relations, based on the opportunity to recruit, locate and manage workforces in the place, time and task most conducive to the former's own economic and political goals" (ibid.: 1) is useful here to account for why they were treated this way. This, however, so I argue, doesn't capture the whole story, since it could create the false impression that such solely economic reasoning behind employers' actions (and therefore, the creation of the conditions of precarity) exhaust the topic. Something which recurs a lot in the articles is the constant mistreatment of women workers by management and factory owners, the frequent complete arbitrariness of women being fired, and the unending (highly gendered) harassment which they endured and which often led to them losing their jobs, as will become visible through the examples which follow. The centrality of this gendered dimension of women's experiences of labour insecurity and instability makes visible the necessity to think precarity and precariousness through a lens which, apart from relationality, takes on board the critical part played by systems of oppression in the (relative and relational) constitution of these terms. While this chapter focuses on gender as a structuring force of labour

relations, I don't hold that it has primacy over other power structures in the constitution of experiences of labour insecurity and instability. Rather, I am using it to showcase the importance of thinking through relevant categories when thinking about these concepts. Race, ethnicity, ability and other intersecting identity markers (conceived also as structures reinforcing inequalities) play no lesser role in how people's experiences of these phenomena are shaped.De Vito makes the claim that "by foregrounding the question of control, and ultimately of power, these definitions additionally allow for a focus on the 'constraint agency'of historical and contemporary actors at the crossroads of materiality and perceptions, external categorisation and self-representation" (De Vito 2017: 220). He thus argues that the possibility of exploring the immaterial dimensions of these processes are encompassed in his definition. However, power here is presented as a force outside of the subjects of labour relations (or, for that matter, the researcher themself), as it is, along with control, presented as a force that operates relationally and not as structuring discourses and people's realities, perception and self-perception. This is why the reconceptualisation of precarity/precariousness is one which necessitates not only the incorporation of gender as a category of analysis, but rather of power structures beyond the economic realm in general as directing the experiences of precarity/precariousness. These are all no less definitive for the experience of precariousness than the economic plane on which precarity has been made visible in a way encompassable by economic/labour discourse. The relationality of the concepts proposed by De Vito considered on par with power structures would account for an understanding of precarity which allows for the stark differences in how it is experienced by different groups of people to come to the fore.

4.4. Harassment and abuse

Several articles describe cases of sexual assault, way before it was, of course, conceptualised that way. Importantly, only a very particular kind of gendered abuse shows up in the articles: the perpetrator of violence is always also the class enemy. Indeed, the gendered (male) class enemy, in the face of the manager, owner (or his son), is partially *constructed* precisely through his denigrating attitude towards working-class women. A frequent trope in leftist writing during the period which visibly has the purpose of drawing a class-based dividing line, it unfortunately means that such periodicals are limited sources in terms of the subject of gendered violence on the shopfloor, completely excluding its dimension *among* members of the working class.

> The son of the director of the warehouse of the *Nikotea* association [...] attempted to disgrace (*da se izgavri*) the worker from the same warehouse Olga Kostadinova, who pushed him away most seriously and for that she received a slap from this respectable son of chorbadzhi[21] Bulgaria. Without getting disheartened by his first failure, on the next day he makes another unsuccessful attempt and treats the stubborn worker to a fist in her back. All of this, of course, "did not make this horny (*oskotyal*) bourgeois sonny sensible."[22] When the worker complained to his father, she immediately got fired for her 'audacity' to complain – with the pretext that the management of the warehouse "firmly insists on the good behaviour and morals of its workers and female workers". The local labour inspector (a man) was notified about the case and he promised to react but a month later there was still no response. This example is illustrative of how not only did women have to endure harassment, but they could often bear the consequences for being harassed. The story of Kostadinova shows yet another dimension of working women's

[21] *Chorbadzhiya* is a word from the Turkish describing a rich person who is usually famous in the locality and owns a business. Chorbadzi Bulgaria therefore means "the Bulgaria of the wealthy"
[22] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (17) (20 August 1921), p. 2

precarious situation. What is visible here is that her precarious condition is indeed not the result of a measure enforced in order to protect or pursue economic interest, but as a result of her being assaulted. That Kostadinova experiences this (and is further fired for speaking up) is tightly related to her status as a woman, rather than simply a worker. Therefore, her economic precarity is inextricably linked to gendered power relations. In this case, the worker's perception of the control she has over her labour power has little to do with the precariousness of her situation as defined by De Vito. Her perception thereof is somewhat irrelevant, as she was treated in a way which she might not have expected (it is very possible that she wouldn't have complained had she known what the outcome would be), and the reason for which she was fired was not related to owners' economic or political goals. Her situation once again points to the importance of considering the genderedness of precariousness; and of viewing economic precarity as a state defined by factors which exceed the economic realm. It is important to highlight that instances of abuse and harassment perpetrated by members of the working class which cannot be found in the communist press would also fall into a consideration of precariousness as a gendered phenomenon.

In addition to the constant insecurity which women experienced at work, employment in the industry was seasonal and stopped for the 'dead months' in winter[23]. As the workload was reduced, women would start getting fired in bunches until a factory ultimately closed for the season. For those who remained employed until the end, the working hours were reduced from eight to seven, with a reduction in workers' already very low wages, and, according to *Rabotnichka*, they still had to perform the same amount of work they did in eight hours

[23] *Rabotnichka* IV (39) (6 December 1932), p. 1

previously[24]. Crowds of unemployed women would stand at the factory gates in the mornings and each day only a few of them would be allowed to walk in and work. Which women would be let in to work was no arbitrary business. On one occasion, the owner picked out a couple of workers on the first day in which the factory opened and since then he kept telling the rest that they should come back for work on the following day[25]. Guards would stand in front of the warehouse, making sure that "no incidents take place" and that "no bolshevik agent" is employed, as the owner himself didn't personally know the women. "Only nicer girls with prettier looks have the rare happiness of being employed, or ones which have been 'recommended'". Judging from this case, employment could be (when conditions allowed) predicated on the very performance of gender: who would receive a job could depend on looks and how well womanhood is performed, through good looks and 'being nice'. In this example as in the previous ones, it is not the case that gendered power relations have primacy in conditioning women's precarity over economic ones. I am rather arguing that they are mutually constitutive and that gender, along with other categories which structure power relations, needs to be analysed on par with economic ones. Finally, the fact that gendered relations play a role in women being employed does not make employment any less of an economic matter. However, the economic as such is gendered in ways which become obscured when we conceive of precarity solely in economic terms.

[24] *Rabotnichka* IV (39) (6 December 1932), p. 1
[25] *Rabotnichka* IV (16) (5 April 1932), p. 3

4.5. The Role of the Labour Inspectorate

The Labour Inspectorate was an institution meant to protect workers from abuses of power on the side of employers. Its representatives often, however, implicitly (or not) sided with employers, showed no interest in workers' experiences or the conditions in which they worked. The tobacco workers' union had direct interest in invalidating the Labour Inspectorate as it presented itself in an antagonistic relationship with labour protection coming from the state and it was reiterated over and over again that labour inspectors are 'the masters' lackeys' and agents of capital. Even if there is an exaggeration present in these descriptions, however, the large amount of cases described in which labour inspectors didn't fulfill their duties serves to show that indeed, in most cases they could not be relied on to interfere and protect workers' interests or penalise management or firms' owners when that was clearly necessary. To use an example from the previous section – the women in Kalamandi's factory who didn't receive their pay because the boxes they had produced had come undone, and who were ultimately fired after he couldn't sell the amount of cigarette boxes they had produced, contacted a male representative of the Labour Inspectorate to investigate the case. What happened in his conversation with the owner is not known to the workers – however, when they went to ask for their wages, they were kicked out "in the rudest possible manner"[26]. The owner even went as far as to tell them that "not only was he not going to pay the wages they'd already worked for, but he would make them work for free."[27]

Sometimes, labour inspectors openly operated as protectors of the employers' interests. In a factory in Stara Zagora a female worker decided to change her workplace, left her job and started

[26] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (21-22) (15 October 1921), p. 6
[27] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (21-22) (15 October 1921), p. 6

working in another tobacco factory. This displeased her former boss and he contacted the labour inspector (a man) who went to her new employer, got into an argument with him and "forced the worker to go back to Kavaldzhiev's factory."[28] Another article reflects on how the division of labour in factories was often modified depending on the employer's needs and whims[29], once again with the explicit support of labour inspectors. A female worker who was hired to fold cigarette boxes was told one day by her boss that she now needs to start ordering them instead. She refuses, saying that she will only do the job she was hired for. Her boss then tells her that she can "get her rags and leave"[30]. She does so and finds work in a candy workshop the following week. Upon being told about this, her ex-employer immediately contacts the labour inspector and asked him to "get him his worker back"[31]. The labour inspector then went to the candy workshop and asked her boss to fire her because she didn't have her worker card. When she said that she doesn't have it because she had been kicked out of her previous job, the inspector said that she should go back and work an additional 15 days in order to get it but he refused to be of help to her in getting her card back or her money compensation from the tobacco factory owner.

4.6. Non-existent labour protection

Both male and female workers could get fired at the owner's, sometimes even at the foreman's whim without justification[32]. The only requirement that factory owners had to fulfill was to give 15 days notice, but this was also very often not done[33]. In the *Trakiya* tobacco cooperation, for

[28] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 3
[29] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 3
[30] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 3
[31] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 3
[32] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 4; IX (17) (20 August 1921), p. 3
[33] *Ravenstvo* III (34) (10 July 1922), p. 3

example, the women worked in horrible conditions and for very low wages (lowest for the cleaners). An article reports that they were being verbally harassed every day, the foreman was calling them bitches, bears, monkeys, among other names. He would fire a few of them every day, without warning, for the smallest mistake, sometimes even without reason. One worker was fired for asking for water. "Of course, there are a few that are his favourites and who get to drink water whenever they like"[34], writes the author. The manager goes inside the salon a few times a day "for a revision" and encourages the foreman to fire them without thinking much. "Fire at least 20 a day! At least there are a lot of them…"[35]

An example of workers' self-organisation salvaging their jobs is given by an article describing the opening of a new tobacco warehouse in the town of Pazardzhik, where mainly women (most of whom under 18) came to be employed. The owners made it a condition for employment that new workers are not organised. Some women did join under this condition, but soon after they "became aware of what that would mean"[36] (they understood that they would be a lot more heavily exploited if they are unorganised) and on the second day after the reopening of the warehouse, they told the factory owner that the town's union section needs to be recognised as the place where all future workers would be employed from, which he conceded to. Their collective effort at organising themselves thus secured their jobs, which were initially given to them on the condition they would accept whatever working conditions they were offered without the option to struggle for their improvement.

Very often organised workers would get fired for spreading agitational material. A few copies of the communist women's newspaper *Ravenstvo* were found in the factory when the supervisor

[34] *Rabotnichka* IV (21) (18 June 1932), p. 3
[35] *Rabotnichka* IV (21) (18 June 1932), p. 3
[36] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (21-22) (15 October 1921), p. 6

decided to go through workers' things during their lunchbreak[37]. The women working there were then pressured to say who gave them the newspapers – the woman who had was immediately fired and the owner said he would fire all of the workers in whose things copies of the newspapers were found. Another female worker who was sacked after three days of work because she was found to be agitating people to join the TWU. When the owners found out that the warehouse "had been set on fire by bolshevism"[38], she was paid the day's wages and was told that there is no work for her there. After firing her, the owners directed their efforts at finding out who it was that asked for her to be employed and fired the male worker who had done so with a 15 day notice – because he was a years' long employee of the warehouse.

Another illustrative example of the extremely low level of job security which workers experienced is that of the *Arav* factory in Sofia, where a strike was announced almost immediately after the reopening of the warehouse in the spring of 1932, which was also much later than usual[39]. Women workers had striked there the previous year too, and some of them still hadn't received their last year's wages. That year, most of the workers were new – elderly women and very few youths. The reason for the strike were the low wages. As soon as they stepped into the factory, they were given a 15 day notice so that the owners could fire anyone who dared ask for better wages or an 8-hour working day (workers would always leave 15-20 minutes after the end of the working day).

"Women workers deceived by the people of the BAPU association" reports on the precarity of women's work in the industry[40]. A new warehouse of an established firm didn't have enough workers and attracted unemployed women with a promise of six months of constant work. Once

[37] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (23-24) (29 October 1921), p. 6
[38] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (19) (17 September 1921), p. 4
[39] *Rabotnichka* IV (22) (25 June 1932), p. 1
[40] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (17) (20 August 1921), p. 3

the women started working in the factory, they were made to work in really bad conditions, to endure harassment and to pay membership fees to the union attached to the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union party. The union representative at the warehouse was threatening them with getting fired if they did not do so, t the implication being that he was working together with their employer. The women were then fired after only 2-3 weeks of work under the pretext that they had completed the amount of work they were supposed to complete in the six months of work that were promised to them. In Plovdiv, a Macedonian refugee, Hrista Kudeva, was fired as soon as the factory guard noticed she was pregnant[41]. She was only 3 or 4 months pregnant and asked to keep her job, saying that she would quit when she could no longer work but the owner responded with "we can't take care of you here." Kudeva's case is one in which her precarity as a worker is most visibly gendered – she is being made redundant only because she is found out to be pregnant, even though she is still capable of work. She is immediately perceived as someone 'to be taken care of' and is let go, as there are plenty of other women who can take her place who are not pregnant. Even though she is willing to accept the precariousness of her own situation for the sake of working a few more months ("I will quit myself when I can no longer work"[42]), she is fired because she is perceived as already less able. Economic reasoning and the search for profit leads her employer to fire her, but his perception of her as a pregnant woman who is already a less efficient (and valuable) worker even though she is only 3 or 4 months pregnant.

Another frequent abuse of workers' rights was them being denied access to healthcare even when parts of their wages were regularly going towards the so-called Public Insurance Fund (PIF). An article mourning the death of a seventeen year-old female worker who died of tuberculosis[43]

[41] *Ravenstvo* III (26) (20 April 1922), p. 3
[42] *Ravenstvo* III (26) (20 April 1922), p. 3
[43] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (19) (17 September 1921), p. 4

highlights the deathliness of the lack of access to healthcare. "For her there wasn't, as there isn't for any of the Nevrokop male and female tobacco workers, a free check-up by a doctor and free medicine, despite the fact that parts of workers' wages are deducted every month for the insurance fund for workers in case of incidents, illness, disability or death."[44] At her funeral which was attended by many fellow workers, the priest pointed out in his speech that her unfortunate fate was the result of poverty, like the sad fate of all workers. At the end of the service, a male worker representing both the communist group and the union branch of the TWU spoke of her life and pointed to the only perceived option for salvation for all male and female workers: becoming organised. Given the numerous cases reporting such events, as well as other forms of abuse of power on the side of employers or the police, it really does appear that self-organising or joining larger already established structures aimed at protecting workers was the only way one could seek out justice – and of course, although the newspapers at hand rarely discussed this, even when workers were organised their attempts at demanding just treatment often failed.

4.7. Conclusion

This chapter has looked in detail at women tobacco workers' working conditions as presented in the communist periodical press from the interwar period. I have considered a wide array of phenomena to be part of the topic of 'working conditions' as women's lives as paid labourers were conditioned by a variety of factors beyond their immediate material environments, such as their vulnerability to sexual harassment and abuse and the likelihood of them being exploited by

[44] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (19) (17 September 1921), p. 4

their employers in gendered ways beyond the confines of the factory (e.g. being made to perform domestic work for them). It has been noted that the narratives available in these newspapers cannot present a full picture of what women's everyday working lives must have looked like. At the very least, topics such as that of harassment most definitely entered these periodicals in a very selective manner. The ill-mannered son of the owner (or manager or foreman) who mistreats women is a common trope of leftist writing of the period (and beyond it) and it is part of the construction of *class* enemies more than anything else. It must have been the case that women often got harassed by their male coworkers as well – but this is not something which would enter the pages of newspapers aiming at uniting the working class and therefore minimising existing antagonisms between working men and women.

I have also employed this broad view of working conditions in order to make a broader argument about the nature of precarity and precariousness as deeply gendered phenomena. It has been argued that the conceptual bases of precarity and precariousness have not been put under scrutiny in the literature and that they need to be reconsidered in light of the implicit gender bias which their economistic conceptualisations put forward. This has implications for what ultimately comes to be visible in research –both historical and contemporary – and the kinds of phenomena and occurrences which are put forward as definitive of workers' experiences. Through the analysis of a variety of articles written by women workers addressing their working conditions and occurrences at work, I have highlighted that women's economic precarity has historically been determined by their treatment as both gendered beings and as 'carriers' of labour power. I have argued that, therefore, if we are not to obscure women's very versatile experiences of precarity, we need to conceive of precariousness and precarity as gendered phenomena. Labour precariousness can hence be conceptualised as the conscious or unconscious experience of

instability contingent upon economic concerns as much as it is to other systems of domination and oppression. The other side of this proposition is that economic precarity itself needs to be regarded as a phenomenon defined by and exercised through gendered power relations; and therefore one which results in qualitatively very different experiences for people based on the ways they are perceived and treated as gendered beings.

5. Who is the woman worker?

This chapter will focus on how women tobacco workers are perceived and represented in the leftist periodical press in the given period. The articles which will be considered present a rare opportunity for women's relationships to other women from the period to be analysed, which is why for the sake of the analysis in this chapter I have chosen to focus exclusively on articles written by women. In pursuing a better understanding of the issues implicated in a discussion of these constructs, I frame my analysis in a discussion of feminist periodical studies. The writers often rely on the distinction between organised and unorganised women for the construction of their narratives, and they somewhat paradoxically argue for the helplessness of unorganised women at the same time as they present instances of (unorganised) resistance on their side. Several constructs which are prevailing in the newspapers will be considered. Among these are the trope of woman-as-mother, as well as that of the worker 'without consciousness'. The latter will be unpacked, to reveal assumptions about both the organised movement and its relationship to working-class women, and working women themselves. The expectations from women workers will then be explored, both from the organised workers' movement and those who employed them. I will consider who the addressees of the articles are and how they are constructed and I will propose what could have been some characteristics of the organised movement which pushed women away. The chapter will further explore whether any presuppositions about 'women's nature' are articulated in the periodical entries or are implicitly suggested. Finally, I will explore the ways in which the stories about some women's daily struggles challenge understandings of the public/private distinction, which has been a central debate in feminist discourse.

5.1. Women writing about women: feminist periodical studies and the decentering of authorship

This first section will engage with issues of women's writing and of women's representation as present in the field of periodical studies in order to set the grounds for the analysis which follows. This chapter, and the thesis in general, analyses how periodical articles construe the identities and agency of the articles' addressees, who were simultaneously their subject matter: organised and unorganised women tobacco workers. It further considers the ways in which these articles strived to mobilise women into action through employing certain tropes and discursive devices. In this chapter I focus on how contributors to the three newspapers in question viewed, constructed, reified and challenged perceptions of working women. This includes exploring the tropes on which they relied to convey their messages of the necessity to organise; whether they relied on essentialising narratives; the manners in which they construed organised and unorganised women as two separate groups with distinct characteristics. In engaging with the field of periodical studies my intention is to bring to the fore the role of these authors (mostly women) in both reinforcing and challenging existing gender norms and in circumscribing and (co)creating the discourse of the organised workers' movement in the period. I also aim to challenge existing trends within periodical studies by pointing out the marginal place of working-class women's writing in the field and exhibiting the potential richness of a more thorough engagement with working-class periodicals, as well as moving away from the issue of authorship as almost invariably the most central subject in analyses in the field.

Modern periodical studies is a relatively recent but vibrant field (Green 2013: 54) and within it there has been a growing number of studies falling under the label feminist periodical studies which are playing an increasingly important role in the larger fields of modernist periodical

studies and of feminist or women's print culture (Green 2009: 191). A subfield of literary studies, feminist periodical studies is especially interested in the idea of the 'woman writer' and tracing the development of feminist thought and indeed as part of a "project of self-scrutiny in feminist studies" (Green 2013: 53). One of periodical studies' biggest contributions to literary studies, however, is precisely the decentering of the figure of the author, and in feminist literary criticism, the destabilisation of the category of the woman writer. ''Periodicals … subvert the dominance of the notion of the author as individual genius, a notion which is a construct of ideologies interested primarily in the romantic individual'' (Brake 1991: 167). "Since the periodical imagines the 'author' as, variously, unknown or anonymous, pseudonymous, collaborative, or performative, the term 'woman' in periodical culture's 'woman writer' is easily both as unstable and as necessary as feminist theory has taught us it should be" (ibid.: 56). Green argues that periodical culture "encourages us to recover not the single woman writer, but the network, the dialogue, the conversation" (ibid.: 58). Interestingly, even in this assertion which clearly decenters the individual author, the focus still remains on the subjects of the written texts, and this is not questioned. Here it is important to mention that feminist periodical studies, as a lot of feminist literary studies in general, has been mostly engaged with the 'recovery' of women writers, and the quest for literary value; and has been predominantly interested in how periodicals construct ideas of modern femininity which is often equated with middle-class femininity. This is perhaps also why a large part of the periodicals studied fall into the category of 'women's magazines' (Happe 2020: 638) and focus on issues such as domesticity, fashion, women's fiction and poetry having to do with the private sphere and personal relations. It has thus considered significantly more middlebrow literature (Powell 2011: 444) than any genres and publications which do not fulfill the criterium of having visible literary value as such and has

heavily focused on the British and American contexts. Going back to the point about Green's recentering of authorship even as she decenters the individual author, Manushag Powell takes on precisely the issue of valuation in periodical studies, while exhibiting a similar attitude towards periodicals to that of Green: one which focuses on the writing skills of the authors and the formal qualities of their writing. "Feminist scholars have long understood that to prize professional writing over other kinds results, intentionally or not, in a de facto devaluation of women as writers" (Powell 2011: 442). She continues: "Yet we struggle with an equal impulse to dismiss writing that is too professional, insufficiently artistic, too clearly created for market popularity or for hyperspecialized audiences, or with financial compensation as its obvious primary goal. We reject on aesthetic grounds texts intended to have very broad appeal and are in turn rejected for writing too narrowly ourselves" (Powell 2011: 442). Powell's exposition of what seems to be a central dilemma in feminist periodical studies once again exhibits an attachment to the formal characteristics of writing and an interest in content only insofar as it is connected to literary value. I would like to suggest that a shift away from the evaluation of the quality, or qualities, of women's writing as related to style and formal qualities, would open up a variety of new possibilities for the development of the field. It is thus not only a decentering of the author, but a decentering of the issue of authorship more broadly, which could open up new perspectives for the field.

While remaining in a framework which prioritises formal qualities of women's writing, Powell argues that periodicals essentially "invite interdisciplinary study, which in turn, by its very nature, can lead us to question received wisdom about women authors and women's issues" (Powell 2011: 448). I would like to take this invitation of sorts and propose that periodical studies and feminist labour history present a great possibility for interdisciplinary research, by

virtue of their overlapping interest in historical publications. I should mention that there are several articles from recent years from within feminist periodical studies which address issues of labour and gender (Perera 2008; Green 2012; Boughey 2019; Walker 2017; Timney 2013) but none of these authors discuss their work in relation to the prevailing characteristics of the field of periodical studies and feminist literary theory. What is missing therefore is precisely a conversation about *how* and *why* it is necessary to study labour-related and working-class periodicals, which contributes to the continuing marginality of the topic of labour within the field.

One final point about the issue of authorship I would like to discuss here is the use of pseudonyms and the anonymisation of authors in periodicals. Ann Ardis has exhibited how the usage of pseudonyms by women in literary magazines which were dominated by male authors contributed to public debates concerning literature and the arts that has become that particular periodical's signature (Ardis 2007). In this study also, the use of pseudonyms and the anonymisation of authors allows for a conversation, albeit of a different kind. All of the articles considered below were written by women, and with no exceptions they were published anonymously[45], signed with initials only or with pseudonyms. According to Beetham, pseudonyms were used strategically and "the space provided by anonymity or pseudonyms was used to rework gender if only within constraints not just of the material but also of ideological power" (Beetham 2006: 239). In the periodicals she discusses, ones focused on literature, the use of pseudonyms by women conceivably had different purposes to the uses of pseudonyms by women engaged in communist activism. While for the first group of women pseudonyms

[45] In Bulgarian, adjectives are always gendered, which is how it becomes visible that anonymous authors were also women: when they use the first person plural to talk about their common fate as workers, they use the feminine form.

allowed a bending of how they would be perceived as gendered beings, in the case of communist women this was often done because of safety reasons, as putting one's name in printed materials carried significant risks of prosecution. However, it is arguable that being able to write and be published without having to sign with one's name created space for working-class women to express themselves in ways they wouldn't necessarily deem appropriate if their names were to appear on the newspapers' pages. Finally, as Green suggests, "such manipulations also encourage us to think again of what it is we might be recovering as we rediscover the 'woman writer' in periodical culture" (Green 2013: 57).

In tracing women's accounts of their (and other women's) actions and particularities as subjects, I don't attempt to theorise on women's subjectivities or identities as such (as gendered or political subjects). Rather, I position accounts of women's experiences in a framework which does not impose a teleological interpretation of their actions as based in a misleading narrative of oppression and liberation or one which relies on binary thinking about subordination and resistance (Bilge 2010). My analysis is based on the notion that "the political consciousness that is an important precondition for any type of radical political change cannot be taken as an unproblematic given. There are many different types of oppositional consciousness, none of which occur spontaneously but are the effects of certain kinds of social and political intervention" (McNay 2010: 520). Inferring from this, I consider women's accounts in the newspapers to be the result both of their self-identification with organised struggle and communism as an ideology, and as a product of the particular social and political context which had a formative role in their formation as subjects.

5.2. Class-aware women and women 'without consciousness'. Who is responsible for women's situation?

"... and there is a reason why they treat them like animals, when with their heads down and whining outside of the workers' organisation. Seeing our powerlessness as individuals, they will mock us however they want and will throw us out like rags whenever they want only with mass organised strength, women comrades, will we stand up for our class interest"[46]

This section will consider the trope of 'women without consciousness' (*nesuznatelni rabotnichki*) which is perhaps the most frequently used trope in the newspapers overall and which constitutes one of the most stable *ascribed* female identities in the three newspapers. It is always positioned, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, in opposition to the construct of 'class-aware' women or women *with* consciousness. In the following, I will attempt to discern what these two categories contain in terms of what categorisations and characterisations of working women they put forward. In the next chapter, this separation will be considered once again, but this time in relation to the particular kinds of collective action which unorganised women ('without consciousness') and organised women ('class-aware') undertook.

The notion of *women without consciousness* clearly refers to a perceived lack of class consciousness although class is not mentioned in the Bulgarian formulation. The usage of the notion of class consciousness itself is very common in orthodox Marxist thought and indeed is still in currency despite the multiplicity of critiques it has received over the decades. It has been reinforced by authors such as Theodor Adorno in whose writing the working class is defined "chiefly in relation to its consciousness (or more precisely its supposed lack thereof)" (Leeb 2017: 104). It is important to highlight that in the articles I analyse the use of 'conscious' women

[46] *Rabotnichka* IV (2) (22 November 1931), p. 4

workers was always synonymous with 'organised'. When invoking the strategic dismissals of organised women workers, for example, an anonymous author uses the phrase "class-aware and awakened women"[47] to mean women who are union members. On the other hand, women who have no consciousness or less consciousness is synonymous with organised women: in one article it is stated that women are more easily exploited and paid less than men "as they are 'without consciousness' and unorganised"[48]. It is also the 'less conscious' among the workers who are bribed with individual offers by employers to spy on other workers.[49] Another article maintains that employers fear organised workers and argues that it is only through organising as part of the TWU that workers "will be freed of the slavery of capitalism"[50]. The author calls for 'workers without consciousness' to become aware of this and unite under the flag of the TWU and that of the Red International of Labour Unions in order to battle capitalism and take the means of production in their hands.

The usage of 'consciousness' to evaluate workers is not an innocent one. By dividing working-class people (or labouring people in general) into two groups, one of people who are *aware* of their class subordination and one of people who aren't, it produces a strict division among the people in question who assumedly have a shared class experience. In lived reality, of course, if we are to accept the usage of *consciousness* at all, the level of 'awareness' is always a spectrum and its presence and degree are not the exclusive domain of organised workers. Considering that the ideologues of the workers' movement, internationally as well as on Bulgarian ground, were almost exclusively men, they were most likely also those who drew this dividing line. I would argue that the discursive separation of working women as ones with consciousness and ones

[47] *Rabotnichka* IV (35) (8 October 1932), p. 1
[48] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (7) (28 February 1921), p. 3
[49] *Rabotnichka* IV (34) (29 September 1932), p. 4
[50] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (19) (17 September 1921), p. 4

without could have been a defining factor in women's alienation from existent union and party structures. Articles addressing both men and women in *Tiutiunorabotnik* also used this trope but arguably less so. While such articles[51] call workers to join the organised struggle, they either merely state that this is their optimal option or argue that the successes of strikes "should convince" the unorganised workers of the necessity to join the union –they do not refer to them as 'without consciousness'. In articles directed specifically at women from the same period (i.e. ones in *Ravenstvo*) this is never the case: in articles which agitate unorganised workers their not being organised is equated with their lack of consciousness. The opposition of organised women to unorganised ones relied on a refusal to consider the perspectives of women who didn't organise and furthermore infantilised and patronised them by 'teaching' them what was good and what was bad for them. It furthermore has the function of attaching class consciousness to the already existing party and union structures in such a way that it precludes a critique of these institutions. This is crucial as the glorification of the union and the party in their existent form gives out the message that they are not flawed – indeed, these articles all argue that it is the women who need to change their disposition, understand their position better. Their 'gaining' of consciousness thus becomes dependent upon them agreeing that these institutions, which rarely paid attention to issues specific to women at all, implicitly and explicitly claiming that they know better about their own situations.

While the trope of 'women without consciousness' is very common in all three newspapers, there is a difference in its usage – *Tiutiunorabotnik* especially abounds in mentions of women without consciousness, *Ravenstvo* – a little bit less so, and in *Rabotnichka* it is present very

[51] See, for example: *Tiutiunorabotnik* VIII (4) (29 September 1919), p. 3-4
Tiutiunorabotnik VIII (11) (24 July 1920), p. 4,
Tiutiunorabotnik VIII (12-13) (14 August 1920), p. 4

rarely in comparison to the other two publications. The fact that its usage is most frequent in *Tiutiunorabotnik* could be explained with the fact that this is the only one of the three newspapers which was not directed at an exclusively female readership. *Ravenstvo* employed this language quite often too, and a lot of the articles related to women tobacco workers (and not only) published in *Tiutiunorabotnik* were published in *Ravenstvo* as well, although unfortunately it cannot be established which publication the articles were written for – if they were at all written with only one of these publications in mind. Articles in *Rabotnichka,* unlike the other two newspapers, do not use the notion of 'consciousness' to call women to action, but only in a cursory manner when they are describing unorganised women's actions which are perceived as having led to the worsening of their working conditions. In *Rabotnichka* is also the only example of unorganised women not being equated with a lack of consciousness:

> "In the great (*velichavi*) struggle for more bread, hygienic conditions, humane behaviour, against the turning of our workplaces into police stations, against the firings and the harassment, the tobacco workers' only support are the class organisations. This is why the dignified response which the conscious women tobacco workers are obliged to undertake is to enter the Tobacco workers professional union and the rest of the class organisations. *Young women tobacco workers*, a lot of whom die of tuberculosis! *Mothers tobacco workers* whose children are hungry, clothless and who are doomed along with you to degeneration, illness and early death, organise!"[52]

This quote moves away from the general usage of the conscious/unconscious trope: it is clearly indicated that women 'with consciousness' do exist outside of the organisations – the invocation

[52] *Rabotnichka* IV (35) (8 October 1932), p. 1

of specific groups of women – mothers, young workers at a high risk of getting ill from tuberculosis – furthermore serves to indicate that the condition in which these women find themselves and the specific struggles which they face are in fact themselves a source of 'consciousness'. This quote, as well as the overall less frequent use of the trope can be seen as part of the overall more grounded historical approach of *Rabotnichka* compared to the other two newspapers. This is not to say that the perception of women's consciousness as stemming from experience is not a flawed one (Scott 1991: 790), but rather that the rhetoric employed by the author is one which would potentially have bigger appeal to working women as opposed to the constant reference to them as 'without consciousness'. *Rabotnichka* tends to focus more on celebrating women's collective action and less so on arguing that unorganised women are at fault for not being part of the union. It is plausible to suggest the eight years between the closing down of *Ravenstvo* and the first issues of *Rabotnichka* taught organised women how to better agitate amongst their unorganised co-workers. Alternatively, it is possible that throughout this time they had indeed come to rethink organised struggle and its meaning for women, although on the pages of *Rabotnichka,* just like in the other two newspapers, there don't seem to be any critiques of the union or the party. I argue that the shifting yet uninterrupted use of the notion of 'women without consciousness' exhibits the contingency of the gendered identities these authors construct for women workers upon the norms which women workers were demanded to uphold. The labelling of other women as 'unaware' and 'without consciousness' serves to make stable, discursively, the identities of organised women – the group of which the authors of the articles were a part. A big part of their self-representation (as organised workers) in the newspapers is precisely the insistence on their experience as 'truly' and 'correctly' struggling working people. Their experience is not taken to be synonymous with a truth about the past which they lived in and co-

created. Rather, the ways in which they employ this language points to how discourse functions through the establishment of difference.

5.3. Women as mothers

The women addressees of the articles are almost always considered only in their quality as workers and not in openly gendered ways. In the periodical organ of the Bulgarian Women's Union – *Woman's Voice (Zhenski Glas)*, for example, articles from the same time period abound in representations of women whose gender and sex are heavily essentialised – women are necessarily mothers, women have a kinder and more gentle nature, women are naturally peaceful, etc. The discourse surrounding women in the leftist newspapers does not exhibit a tendency to ascribe specific features to womanhood in any direct manner (i.e. motherhood, for example, is not described as something women *should* perform). Womanhood is, however, frequently equated with motherhood (by virtue of motherhood being 'women's domain').Women are often described as carrying a heavier burden than men in that they are presented as both workers and mothers. While there doesn't seem to be an invocation of femininity or motherhood as obligatory for women, the fact that motherhood is implicitly accepted as 'what women do' still serves to essentialise women as mothers. This is not in conflict with leftist discourse from this time period and beyond on an international scale – ever since August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* (1879) women workers tended to be presented mostly as the people carrying the heaviest burdens of capitalism. Appeals to femininity and women's *essential* difference from men; the attribution of qualities considered to be traditionally feminine to women has been interpreted in socialist and communist discourse as part of bourgeois morality. The association of

women with motherhood, however, did not necessarily fall under the category of bourgeois morality – while most frequently not made explicit, it was taken for granted that women are to be mothers, and sometimes motherhood would be romanticised too.

This is why it is curious that evocations of motherhood on the pages of all three newspapers are very rare. Most of the ones which are present serve the purpose of dramatised description – when discussing living and working conditions of women workers who are also mothers; or mothers are called to join the struggle, along with young women, like in the example given in the previous section[53]. In all of these, mothers are called, precisely because of the struggles which they face as mothers, to join the union – which will then help them lead a successful struggle.

While not frequent, depictions of mothers are still present. One example is to be found in an article in *Ravenstvo* which describes the non-existent application of the law for protection of women and children and which starts with a short historical narrative about women entering into the industrial workforce and the assumedly ensuing necessity for the creation of this law. The article does not take issue with the fact that such a law does indeed reify women's roles as mothers, and it further applies a moral standard to the experience of motherhood: "When women [first] entered the workforce, because of the heavy exploitation, they started *degenerating* as mothers and child mortality started rising rapidly"[54]. This sentence is followed by what appears to be the logical solution for the author: "This called for the creation of a law to protect women's and child labour." There is no further explanation regarding why child mortality has risen: a direct causal connection is established between women's entrance into the workforce, the exploitation to which they are then subjected, and their 'degradation' as mothers. This mode of thinking directly replicates Marx's own essentialising reflections on the relationship between

[53] *Rabotnichka* IV (35) (8 October 1932), p. 1
[54] *Ravenstvo* III (24) (1 April 1922), pp. 3-4

mothers and children in industrial society (Leeb 2017: 181). Child-rearing is implicitly made fully women's responsibility. Even more, the use of the verb 'degenerated' (*izrazhdat*) implies that there is a natural, proper way to be a mother and women who have become waged workers have come to diverge from it and become bad mothers. Not only is the raising of children fully women's responsibility, but if they struggle with providing care, it is *them* who have become in a sense unnatural, which, once again is an assertion directly taken from Marx (ibid.: 182) and which is congruent with leftist discourse surrounding women in the period.

The only other article concerning tobacco workers in all three newspapers which essentialises women and places motherhood at the centre of woman as an identity is a report in *Rabotnichka* written by a male tobacco worker who went to Moscow as a correspondent. The article is titled "How women tobacco workers and their children live in the Soviet Union" and is one of the longest articles concerning women tobacco workers in all of the available issues of the newspaper. From the title it already becomes visible that 'woman' is equated with mother'. This is confirmed by the first sentence in which he sets the background for his story: "The first thing I did when I arrived at the *Doukat* factory was to see what makes the Soviet mother happy and free – namely, the care for mothers and children." Even though the title suggests that it is women's condition which will be explored in the article, it is only mothers' which is addressed throughout – the article is constructed through oppositions of the condition of mothers and their children in Bulgaria who live in poverty and without social protection, and their perceived situation in the Soviet Union as taken care of by the state. Even though these two examples are built on essentialising narratives about women, it is worth noting that they stand out as exceptions in the context of all other invocations of motherhood which avoid evaluating women's capacity to be mothers, and which are also rare in the wider context of the journals.

5.4. Exceptional brave women and their 'ordinary' counterparts

The last point made above does not mean, however, that sexist assumptions about women – in the sense of ascribing essentialising characteristics and employing gendered stereotypes – are not present in the newspapers. Rather, it is the case that these do not operate through essentialising narratives but are to be found through reading against the grain, as I will show in the following. Most prominently, women are seen as in need of guidance and protection, as is visible in the patronising motif present in a lot of the articles which was already discussed in the first section. Another running theme which exhibits the presence of gendered stereotypes on the pages of the newspapers is that of celebrating the exceptionality of organised women workers and especially certain individuals who are seen as showcasing unmatched bravery in standing up for themselves and other women workers. One example are the physical clashes during strikes. A woman named Zdravka Hranova, for example, "seeing that they want to arrest her sister, jumps on the guards and heroically fights for the protection of the women workers"[55]. Hranova entering a physical fight to protect her sister is taken to represent a defense of women workers collectively. The highlighting of the heroization of 'exceptional' working women is not intended to imply that this is something negative. Instead, it has the purpose of foregrounding that this is only one part of the story.

The other side of the coin are unorganised workers who are construed in opposition to these heroes. They were, however not construed as fearful or docile, as the following example demonstrates:

[55] *Rabotnichka* IV (38) (24 November 1932), pp. 1-2

> Indignant [at the owner's refusal to pay their wages], the organised women workers took the initiative and called for a public assembly, at which everyone agreed to leave the factory at precisely 4.30. However, only the women from one of the salons left, in the other two the workers didn't have the courage to do so. Each worker was looking at the one next to her and since the foreman was making them work, they stayed late. We should make the conclusion that solidarity and 'closeness' (*splotenost*) among the women workers is what makes the masters fulfill their wishes[56]

The behaviour of the women who didn't take action could easily be interpreted as having to do with women being weak, soft or docile, but instead what is stressed is that solidarity is the way for them to alleviate their suffering. Nonetheless, the valorisation of certain characteristics of women which bring them closer to an 'ideal' female worker who is always organised, fearless and outspoken, is at the expense of other qualities and actions which would not have made it to the newspapers or the historical record as a whole.

5.5. Respectable women: workers' honour and honorable work

As a whole, all three newspapers tend to avoid discussions of honour and of respectability. However, there are exceptions which will be discussed here that are telling of how these notions were being conceptualised by leftist writers at the time. Two examples will be considered: one article which draws the contours of respectable work and one which addresses the issue of honour. The first article discusses the situation of women workers in the *Independent Bulgaria* tobacco factory in Rousse, who were excitedly expecting to get the pay promised to them by the

[56] *Rabotnichka* IV (2) (22 November 1931), p. 4

owners around the winter holidays but all their hopes failed, and the promise turned out to be a lie[57]. On New Year's Eve the work was prolonged by 2-3 hours, and 3-4 days beforehand they were given 10 leva each as a present by the director of the factory, who was standing at the front door and giving the money out to them as if they were beggars. When one of the women said "What am I going to do with 10 leva?" he responded: "Don't eat so much and it'll be enough." A male worker, feeling the big humiliation of taking the money, refused to take it with the words: "This isn't even enough for a cup of tea!". The master wasn't ashamed to say: "Well this money is intended precisely for you to get a cup of tea, and only because of the goodwill of the management." For working on New Year's Day, the workers were given 65 lv and not a full wage like in the other two factories where the women workers are organised. This is how the masters will play with the fearful and ununited women workers, until they organise and collectively shout out: "Women workers are not beggars." While there is a lot to unpack in this story, for the purposes of this section and chapter I will focus on the usage of 'begging' and 'beggars' in the article. Here, there is an explicit urge for women to dissociate themselves from begging, presented as a commonsensical truth: 'no one wants to be associated with beggars'. The other side of this call is the moral judgement that begging is wrong and from there, an implicit valorisation of work (and waged work especially) as intrinsically valuable and respectable, as opposed to begging which is not. That capitalism produces poverty is an unchallengeable truth in leftist discourse, but it appears that some of the ways in which people cope in situations of poverty are not respectable. It is also arguable that begging was a gendered activity. At the very least, women were pushed to extreme poverty more often so than men due to more precarious working conditions, lower wages and their high dependence on male income for their survival –

[57] *Ravenstvo* III (20) (20 February 1922), p. 3

meaning that if they were to start living as single mothers or outside of family units for any reason, they were more likely to have to beg in order to sustain themselves. The threat, therefore, of being associated with beggars which the article creates, serves not only to exclude women who do beg from the category of respectable women, but it also functions as a partial affirmation of capitalist conceptions of value and labour as tied to productivity.

In an article also discussed in the previous chapter, which addresses the dismissal of a woman who dared complain to the owner when his son was harassing her, honour plays a central role in the story. The author states that industrial work is bad for women, as "many of them fall victim to tuberculosis and to the dirty and criminal hands of masters and their lewd sons and who often push them into the arms of debauchery (*razvrat*)". For the author this shows the real faces of the "fake protectors of morality", these faces are the faces of "abusers (*pohitieli*) of the honour of women workers and worker families". "[Male and female] tobacco workers – have a good look at them! Lift up your chins and remember who you are! These are criminal hands which are today encroaching upon the only treasure in the workers' family: the worker's honour. Rise together as one to protect your personal, family and worker's honour! Don't let offenses (*gavri*) happen but uncover them and reproach them!"[58] The article ends with a call to join the union "in order to struggle against your enemies whose criminal hands need to be cut off so that such offenses can't happen again, nor attacks on our workers' honour and dignity."[59] Honour is, unsurprisingly, the first association made when sexual and physical assault of a woman worker are the subject of the story. The first sentence implies that harassed women are actually tempted by demoralised men to become 'unrespectable' themselves. Ultimately, the author stresses her honour *as a worker* being harmed and her 'personal honour' A relationship between a woman's

[58] *Ravenstvo* III (20) (20 February 1922), p. 3
[59] *Ravenstvo* III (20) (20 February 1922), p. 3

honour and her family's is established, when "the real faces" of masters are revealed ("abusers of the honour of women workers and worker families"). While the author suggests that any worker's honour is vulnerable to abuses on the sides of capitalists, the conception of honour put forward is still explicitly tied to womanhood and gender, and a masculinist one.

5.6. Working women's bodies as transgressive

This section engages with working women's bodies and the very ways in which they occupied working spaces. The focus are the documented instances in which women's bodies stand as a challenge to a perceived social order. The overall picture painted by the newspapers' contributors is one which foregrounds relations between women workers and their higher-ups. As will be discussed in the next chapter, it is important to highlight that leftist newspapers are not a place where a critical attitude can be found regarding behaviours of male workers – and that the figure of the manager or factory owner sexually harassing women is the primary lens through which gender is regarded. With this in mind, from these sources it is impossible to sketch a more full picture of women's experiences of harassment at work. What is possible is an analysis of attitudes towards instances of harassment from men who were also 'class enemies' and a discussion of how women suffering harassment were seen.

It was often the case that foremen and managers would attack women, verbally and physically, because of how they situated their bodies. A foreman at one of the warehouses of the Austrian Regie insulted the worker Ginka Stavreva 'bloodily' and kicked her in the legs because she had dared to put them on the working table as they had gone numb[60]. He told her that if her legs were

[60] *Rabotnichka* IV (3) (29 November 1931), p. 3

going numb, she could quit her job – there are plenty of workers to take her place. He warned her not to talk back to him because he could kick her out of the factory. “He thinks of himself as the master”, notes the author – implying that such harassment was more common at the hands of factory owners, if not considered more ‘normal’. In the *Rekolta* warehouse, “if the expert sees a working woman with her legs spread as she works, he shames her in front of everyone[61]: "Put your legs together, you've perched (*prosnala*) yourself like a cow. This is a workshop." A lot of foremen, the author adds, would use a variety of other ‘very polite words’ that are ‘inherent’ to the masters to address women and they would evoke the ubiquitous unemployment in order to instill fear in them. One day the owner walked into the *Pashoolu* factory and started swearing at a female worker for eating inside[62]. The women objected to his behaviour and said that they’re doing it out of necessity. He then jumped on one of the workers, and threw her out while kicking her and hitting her. The workers started crying. This led to more of them being physically attacked.

All of these examples serve to show the wide range of behaviours for which women were being harassed. This violence is highly gendered – it is precisely because they are women that they cannot spread their legs, that they can be not only told off but insulted and physically assaulted for transgressing what is deemed acceptable by their higher-ups. The very presence of women’s bodies as sexed and gendered in the spaces of their exploitation was therefore unacceptable; as such instances of violence defined their everyday lives – their waged labour was defined through their selling their labour power as much as it was by their experience of everyday abuse. This speaks to an array of characteristics which are expected from women workers on the side of upper-class men and their employers specifically – they are acceptable when they are invisible,

[61] *Rabotnichka* IV (2) (22 November 1931), p. 4
[62] *Rabotnichka* IV (2) (22 November 1931), p. 4

silent and taking up as little space as possible. That these seem to shape the perfect woman worker does not mean that in lived reality there *was* a way in which to perform such an identity, as is implied by the discussion above: fulfilling these criteria need not have meant that women could avoid violence, which serves to show that along with these 'qualities' a working woman, from the perspective of employers, is also someone whose boundaries and bodily autonomy are there to be violated.

5.7. Uneducated, Demonised: women's reflections on their own positionalities

Women writers, albeit rarely, did include in their writing analyses of the ways which society perceived them. This section will focus on these rare instances of self-reflective deliberation and will cover the topics of women's own perception of their identities as organised workers associated with the communist party and women's reflections on their lack of education.

In an article in *Rabotnichka* the author worriedly highlights that despite the horrible conditions which they find themselves in, very few women workers are organised, especially in the organisations of the unemployed[63]. She insists that women need to organise in order for their needs and demands to be met and finishes with the argument that once they are the majority, "the government will not close the doors to the 'bolshevik agents' – the conditions which masters make workers work under are themselves the creators of these 'agents'". In other words, 'bolshevik agents' do not exist except for in the minds of employers and political enemies: organised workers are perceived as such by them because they pose a threat. This point is of particular interest as it presents a reflection on the side of the author about the dominant

[63] *Rabotnichka* IV (16) (5 April 1932), p. 3

representation of the group she is part of. It is therefore an abstraction from her own position which manages in only a few words to present an analysis of how the dominant political discourse has assigned her and her comrades a label which operates to demonise and marginalise their political stances and struggle.

An article in *Rabotnichka* presents a take on the effects of working-class women's lack of education. The author, one of the women working in the factory in question, reports that the salons are very cold and it's often the case that they don't have enough work for a whole day[64]. One day they decided to leave early as they'd finished their work. The foreman stopped them and said "Where are you going, donkeys?" They told him and the owner that they'd come back tomorrow as there was no more work for that day. They were threatened that they'd get sacked if they do so and were told they're better off "here in the warm". One worker dared to speak up and said that they are actually very cold and the owner started shouting at them about the huge amount of wood they'd burnt for them. "In reality", the author adds after quoting the owner, "they sell most of this amount to their workers, taking away from their wages double the price of the wood". After being threatened, the women decided to stay. One of them went to get wood to light a fire but the logs were all wet and rotten. She went to the owner and told him that they wouldn't burn and would only create smoke. "You're very stupid, woman, did you ever go to school, didn't you read that water makes fire burn better?" When the worker ironically asked him why, then, was it the case that they used dry logs in his office, he commanded her to stay quiet. The story finishes here and the author turns to all women workers with the following call:

[64] *Rabotnichka* IV (19) (date illegible, April 1932), p. 3

> "Yes, women comrades, they will call us donkeys and other names; and they will lie to us with science because we are uneducated (*prosti*) workers. And we are uneducated because while capital reigns, we will be kept away from schools, from enlightenment and science, and instead we will fill up the unhygienic workshops, factories and warehouses, in order to fill up the pockets and the banks of capitalists. … Organise!"

The author simultaneously reflects on women's lack of education and the verbal harassment and belittling attitude which they are made to suffer through on a daily basis. The fact that the owner had tried to shame the worker for not being educated and the very fact that the workers are uneducated are not in the least a source of shame. Not only that, but the phrase "they will lie to us with science" implies a critical awareness of the ways in which owners can use their lack of education to try to manipulate them, and it implies a critical attitude towards the limitations of scientific discourse itself to explicate their experience: they know they are cold and that the wet logs don't, scientific knowledge of how water and fire react is not needed there – scientific discourse is therefore taken down from the pedestal which the 'educated masters' place it on.

5.8. Organised women: formal politics at home and abroad

This section will discuss women's political activism and specifically their involvement with national and international politics and their ideological stances. A lot of the articles in the three newspapers devoted to women tobacco workers discuss their relationship to what I will call 'formal politics' for lack of a better word. Organised women expressed stances on issues which concerned international and local events which were in unison with those expressed in the general communist press of the time. As suggested by several articles, unionised working women

were some of the most active in standing up against the war[65] and were particularly vigilant when it came to speaking up in defense of the Soviet Union during the 1930s.

Organised women workers from the *Fazan* factory, for example, held a conference with their unorganised colleagues to highlight that "war only brings poverty and hunger to the working class and wealth for individual factory owners and bankers; that the victims of the previous war live in poverty when they should be taken care of by the state; that the preparation for war is entirely dependent on the working class"[66]. In an article which focuses on the anti-war effort in *Rabotnichka* women tobacco workers are singled out as the most active in the struggle[67]. In the Austrian and Italian regies there were anti-war strikes; in the former 300 women took part, in the latter – 500. Women tobacco workers were also the most active in the conferences and gatherings for the international anti-war conference in August 1932 called by the World Committee against War and Fascism; during this time women's anti-war commissions were also created.

Apart from engaging with international affairs, organised workers at local sections addressed changes in policies which had a direct effect on their working conditions – the most frequently mentioned example is the concerted effort at protesting the cuts of the Social Security fund in 1931 and 1932. In some instances, women filed letters to institutions, on other occasions they held events to popularise the issues related to the cuts. The women workers of the *Balkan Tabak* warehouse in Plovdiv gathered at a conference and discussed the new restrictions of the Social Security fund which are detrimental to the working class and are meant to worsen the already bad material condition of the working class, rather than better it[68]: "We protest in indignation and

[65] *Rabotnichka* IV (22) (25 June 1932), p. 4,
[66] *Rabotnichka* IV (22) (25 June 1932), p. 4
[67] *Rabotnichka* IV (29) (17 August 1932), p. 1
[68] *Rabotnichka* IV (3) (29 November 1931), p. 4

demand: 1. The removal of these reactionary measures. 2. State subsidy (*izdruzhka*) and free medical treatment for the unemployed and their families. Down with the new restrictions! The robbers of the Social Security fund – in court!" Yet another mode of action to address changing policies were strikes, such as the one in the *Karshev* warehouse:

> "We, the [male and female] workers of the Karshev warehouse, protest most energetically against the new order of the Labour Directorate via which all social benefits for the workers are taken away. We want: free choice of doctors, for all types of medicine to be covered by the fund without exceptions, all lent money from the Social Security fund to be collected so that they can be used for their intended purpose. Immediate reopening of all workers' clubs, complete and unconditional amnesty [for political prisoners], the removal of ZZD[69], the legalisation of BKP, BKMS[70] and freedom of the press!"[71]

As can be observed in this example, the demands made in relation to the particular policy which is harmful to women tobacco workers is linked to other issues pertaining to the legality of the communist-aligned organisations, including a call for complete amnesty for all workers who are held in prison because of their politics.

[69] *Zakon za zashtita na darzhavata* – The Law for Protection of the State
[70] *Bulgarski Komunisticheski Mladejki Sayuz* – The Bulgarian Communist Youth Union
[71] *Rabotnichka* IV (3) (29 November 1931), p. 4

5.9. Challenging the public/private divide: women performing 'housework' in the factory; women's informal labour for other households

In this final section I look at the *content* of women tobacco workers' labour which, at times, reveals further assumptions about gender and women's perceived roles which go beyond the obvious and beyond the issues which the newspapers themselves tackle. There is a small number of articles which mention in passing that working women in fact sometimes had to perform labour during the working day which was far from what they had signed up for. While these mentions are rare, it is precisely the matter-of-fact way in which these forms of labour are mentioned which suggests that they likely were very common. Further, these passing mentions suggest that leftist writers at the time didn't feel that such forms of labour were an issue in themselves – which is important in pointing out the limitations of leftist discourse in recognising and addressing working women's issues, but also in uncovering assumptions about gender roles and 'women's nature'.

The article "Women tobacco workers – slaves to the master and servants to the *bashii*[72]" addresses the exploitation of women in the famous *Nikotea* factory which goes beyond the 'usual' exploitation of waged labourers. "Not only are workers there badly paid, treated inhumanely and not only are the working conditions 'murderous', but it appears as if the female workers are paid to be servants to the *bashii* as well"[73], begins the author. A female worker, Tsonka Letcheva, was called into a *maystor*'s[74] house to cut rags for his wife. As the family

[72] Bashiya (pl. bashii) – a word from the Turkish language denoting someone who holds the highest position in a certain business or institution

[73] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (13) (13 May 1922), p. 4. It is difficult to convey the peppery tone of this statement in English, but the point is to ironise the "masters" who allow themselves to exploit the female workers even beyond what they pay them for (which is in itself too little for the labour they perform which they've been hired for).

[74] It doesn't become clear exactly what position this man held. Maystor is a word used to describe skilled workers, but in order for him to have had such power to command women workers, he must've held a managerial position, which is likely what is implied here by the stress on his skillfulness.

didn't have appropriate scissors, however, they borrowed a pair from the maystor's associate (*pomoshtnik maystor*). While Tsonka Letcheva was using the scissors, they accidentally broke. The wife of the associate insisted that she wanted a pair back and the worker was made to go around town all day with her and lose a day's wages in order to find a pair which was to the lady's liking. The worker was furthermore made to pay 55 leva for it[75]. The same maystor later sent an elderly woman worker to go to his house, collect his ill child and take it to the city hospital. The article finally laments the position of workers (make and female). There is an interesting switch from addressing both male and female workers to addressing only women: "Here is what a heavy and poor state has been brought upon you, [male and female] comrades, you Harmanli tobacco [male and female] workers. To be slaves and servants of capital and its lackeys (*kopoi*). Become aware, get together, every single one of you (*do edna – feminine)* – organise in your tobacco workers' sections and with collective effort force your masters and their lackeys to listen to your pain, to consider your interests, rights and freedoms."[76] This statement, and the seemingly almost involuntary switch from addressing both men and women to only women can mean either that the warehouse employs almost exclusively women or it could have been done to stress that it is women who are in particularly sharp need of having the support of the union because of their unmatched exploitation which, as shown by the article, extends even beyond the gates of the warehouse. It is unlikely that men were made to run chores for higher-ups in the same way. While such occurrences might have not made it to *Tiutiunorabotnik*'s pages as this could present an unwelcome challenge to male workers' self-identification with pride and

[75] This could be between one and a half and eight days' wages. The article doesn't say how much Tsonka Letcheva was making a day but says that the wages in the factory varied from 7 to 38 leva a day. It is plausible to suggest that the higher wages were kept for the "skilled" positions – those of men, so the loss for Tsonka Letcheva must have been significant.

[76] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (13) (13 May 1922), p. 4

respectability, the chores Letcheva was made to run are tied to the domestic realm and thus deeply gendered. The article is illuminative about how vast the scope of things which higher-up employees could allow themselves to make women workers do is. It is also a rare account of dynamics in the factory which go *beyond* the walls of the factory itself. Secondly, the very title grasps the attention with the invocation of a strong word like 'slaves': even though the three newspapers use a lot of emotional and evocative language, they generally stray away from using slavery as a metaphor for workers' condition. The use of 'slavery' here is visibly tied to the fact that these women are made to do work which is not part of their job description but also specifically work which ties them to doing *domestic* lives of their 'masters'. The author not associating the worker's experience with her experience as a woman (and her being, in this case, exploited beyond the industrial work she was paid to do in a gendered manner) implies an implicit acceptance of domestic labour as naturally women's domain. While it is precisely because Letcheva is a worker who is made to perform additional labour that her condition starts resembling unfree labour for the author, it is worth noting that it is work which takes them away from the factory and into the homes of those whom they depend on for pay which evokes the notion of slavery. While women were often made to work overtime without getting extra pay, it is only the performance of unpaid *domestic* labour which is discursively tied to unfree labour. Furthermore, the relationship between domestic work and slavery is nowhere to be found when women are performing this domestic labour for their own families, suggesting that *that* kind of domestic labour is natural for women. Finally, this case demands a closer look at the conceptual underpinnings of paid and unpaid, industrial and domestic work which we employ in discussions of labour, and seeing how these are challenged by scenarios like this one. If Tsonka Letcheva 'accepts' this as part of her employment, can we consider this part of her waged labour? If she

doesn't get paid for other days at work because her boss decided to meddle with the books and to lie that she didn't come to work; but she gets paid for the day she spent with his wife cutting rags, what does this do to our understandings of waged labour and domestic work, separately and in relation to each other? How is her situation similar to that of those workers who patch socks for their family members in their lunch break, if she is doing a similar kind of work but coerced and for somebody else? One particularly useful proposition of Christian de Vito's in relation to these questions is that we need to go beyond established divides in labour history discourse, as elaborated in a recent collaborative article, to address "the persistence and transformation of coercion and bondage across world empires, gender regimes, and historical eras to overcome the classic divides of labor history discourse (free/unfree, productive/unproductive, capitalist/precapitalist) by linking the stories of work and production with those of violence, expropriation, marginalization, and criminalization" (De Vito et al 2020: 645). While their focus is on bondage and coercion and slavery is central to their discussion, undoing these binaries can be extremely useful in understanding labour relations which are based in waged work. They allow for the fluidity and contradictions of different kinds of labour to come to the fore, and thence the blurring of domestic and industrial labour; and also the elusive length and contents of the workday for women workers who not only had a second shift waiting for them at home, but whose double shifts sometimes merged and seeped into each other. This is visible in the example of women spending most of their lunch breaks mending socks. The fact that they were mending socks during their break shows the overwhelming amount of chores which was their responsibility and it blurs the line between the 'two shifts' – what is conventionally considered housework is brought into the space of industrial, waged labour; performed in the only time of the official workday intended for a break.

5.10. Conclusion: Women's writing and constructs of women's identities in periodicals

This chapter began by delineating the field of feminist periodical studies and suggesting that the manner in which authorship is centered by scholars in the field forecloses many possible alleyways for analysis. I specifically pointed out that the existing literature tends to focus on middle-class publications and single out questions about literary value. Against this backdrop I proposed that the scope of productive questions addressed would be significantly widened if working-class publications, such as the ones discussed here, are to be taken on par with the more traditional for the field middlebrow periodicals, and if the content of women's writing is centered in the analysis rather than its formal qualities. Throughout the sections which follow this introductory exposition, I have focused on the ways in which women workers were represented by other female writers and in doing so I have engaged with their discursive practices of both reinforcing and challenging essentialising notions of womanhood. I have considered the trope of 'workers without consciousness' which, I argue, serves to discursively separate organised and unorganised women in a way which made these two categories appear starkly different and which might have contributed to working women's alienation from the organised workers' movement. The role of motherhood in the articles was then considered, and the ways in which it reinforced already existing beliefs within leftist discourse about women's role as mothers, but which was also a very rare occurrence in all three newspapers. The question of 'exceptional' heroic women workers was addressed, and the few present discussions of honour and respectability were analysed. The next section considered the issue of sexual assault and harrassment in the workplace and the ways in which women's bodies as presented by the writers challenged established norms of the environments they worked in. The following two sections explored how women writers perceived and reflected on the position of organised women and

working women in general, with reference to how they were being treated and perceived by their higher-ups and to their own self-identification with the organised movement and their position as working women. Finally, I discussed the question of the public/private divide and discursive genderedness of industrial versus domestic labour. All of these considerations exhibit how working women's writing has served to shape images of working-class women. By virtue of not putting authorship at the centre of analysis but discussing the relationship of women writers to the other women they discussed, such analysis helps recreate discourses surrounding gender and work while at the same time discussing the self-perception of women writers as part of (or in relation to) the groups they address. It thus opens up the issue of authorship and the role of women writers in a relational manner which provides possibilities for analysis which have so far not been the subject of analysis and theoretical discussion in the field of feminist periodical studies.

6. Instances of working women's collective action: the faltering separation of 'organised' and 'unorganised' women

This chapter will focus on the collective action and militancy of working women which aimed to improve working women's conditions of life in various ways. I firstly consider the concepts of agency and resistance which are an inseparable part of the discussion of women workers' collective action. After this, I look at the demands put forward by organised women. In her study of French tobacco workers' unions before the First World War, Salin (2014) makes the argument that women's preference for direct action, as opposed to men's tendency to lean on strategic action and theoretically informed methods, can be interpreted as in fact a more radical kind of militancy because of its character as a force which ruptures the status quo. I take her argument as a stepping stone for my own. I argue that the concrete demands women put forward, which included calls to revolution a lot more rarely than the ones formulated for audiences which consisted of both men and women or only men, are themselves in certain senses more radical than the latter. This is so precisely because of the detailed better conditions of life they envisioned for themselves. In doing so, they shaped a discourse resistant to both masculinist communist discourse and the dominant political discourse of the day. Subsequently, I explore the ways in which women workers in the Bulgarian tobacco industry acted as part of the organised workers' movement. Via this, it will become visible what behaviours for women workers were applauded by the organised movement, which was indeed a very small range of actions. These often overlapped with what was found to be reprehensible by factory owners, managers and foremen, but the latter included a variety of other behaviours and actions as well. While in the newspapers women are not explicitly criticised for any gendered behaviours by the authors, unorganised women's acts of collective resistance are treated in a somewhat dismissive manner.

In the final section, I look precisely into the instances of unorganised women's acts of standing up against injustice at their workplaces and the ways in which these are covered by the newspapers which often refuse to give due credit to women for their collective action. While the agitational nature of these publications means that the attitudes of the TWU towards women workers are only covered in a limited manner, the articles do provide a glimpse into how the union related to them and vice versa.

6.1. Agency and resistance: contested concepts

The topic of women's organised and unorganised struggle raises questions of agency and resistance – two of the most debated concepts in feminist theory. Agency is often taken to designate a straightforward "ability of individuals to have some kind of transforming effect or impact on the world" (McNay 2016: 39), but as McNay highlights, despite the fact that it is a universal capacity, "it is socially realized in a variable and unequal fashion: it means different things according to the cultural context and some individuals and groups clearly have more agency than others" (ibid.). Furthermore, agency is often imbued with ethical and moral criteria that are not made explicit – there is a prescriptive element to the notion which often remains out of sight when interpretive work is being done. The same goes for the notion of *resistance* – another very important concept in feminist discussions, which can be helpful as much as it can be misleading. Resistance is often opposed to subordination in ways which don't do justice to specific contexts and lived experiences (Bilge 2010: 9), or in other words, it has been used to pose false dichotomies and to promote harmful culturalist interpretations of social practices, especially in liberal feminist discourse – perhaps most visibly in feminist debates surrounding

the veiling of Muslim women (ibid.). According to Bilge, postcolonial critiques too use the notion of resistance in ways which fail to do justice to women's experiences, and the concept has been imposed on their actions externally, ignoring the meanings which they themselves ascribe to, in the case of her article, veiling. The fact that these big concepts have been used in problematic ways does not invalidate their potential to advance knowledge – it does mean, however, that they need to be used carefully. For McNay, resistance is an important concept in that it "moves feminism beyond the adjudicative mode of some of its formulations of agency as autonomy toward more open-ended and experimental forms of politicized ethics" (McNay 2016: 45). I would argue that, given Bilge's critique and that of other scholars, perhaps most famously Saba Mahmood (2006), it has become visible that resistance can also be employed in ways which move us further away from rather than closer to "more open-ended and experimental forms of politicized ethics". However, McNay's particular definition opens up ways of thinking about agency and resistance which are aware of these possible pitfalls. For her, "Freedom is not about stipulating the way individuals 'ought' to live but rather encouraging them to interrogate the limits of what appears to be natural and inevitable in present forms of identity and attempting to go beyond them" (ibid.). Resistance is not a totalising concept which requires of individuals a complete rejection of the very symbolic systems "through which they understand themselves as active subjects" (ibid.) – it operates through a nuanced understanding of the workings of power and desire and through the recognition that norms can also be a source of pleasure and meaning (ibid.). "Contra theorists of substantive autonomy, the logic of resistance demonstrates that empowered agency need not involve an outright rejection of oppressive norms but rather operates through displacement from within, receiving its specific form and rationale from the constraint itself" (McNay 2016: 44-5). She notes how, through the influence of post-

structuralism on feminist thought, agency has come to be understood as a type of practice that is brought into being by constraint itself— namely, agency as resistance (McNay 2016: 44). The collapsed distinction between the two opens the door for the critique that mundane social practices come to be romanticised and attributed with "a questionable contestatory force" (ibid.: 46). This critique does not intend to deny that "individuals do routinely display active, creative agency in the shaping of their lives" (ibid.) but has the purpose of insisting that it is necessary to make explicit what it is that renders a given action or set of practices 'resistant,' and in what specific ways these challenge the hegemonic order, even if in a tangential manner (ibid.). Ultimately, it is important to remember that agency "is not so much a thing in itself as a vehicle for thinking through broader issues, such as the nature of freedom and constraint" (McNay 2016: 39).

6.2. Working women's demands

This first section will focus on (organised and unorganised) women's demands in relation to their working conditions as they were articulated when they took direct action. I argue that the practical, yet brave and exhaustive demands which women put forward, depart from received understandings of what is radical and that it is precisely their fight for immediate improvements which represents an underappreciated radical vision for life without oppression. Unskilled workers' demands have often taken a similar shape (see, for example Montgomery 1987: 67). I take radical to describe actions and phenomena which fundamentally depart from what appears to be within the boundaries of established norms, and in the context of workers' collective action in particular, actions which include envisioning (and demanding) a state of affairs which is

unachievable without systemic change. In this sense, I am not proposing that women's demands are more radical because they pertain to them as women, but rather that their demands did not fall into the category of radical as commonly construed by leftist discourse at the time: as necessarily evoking revolution and liberation, which was indeed the domain of male-dominated perceptions of class struggle (Salin 2014). Women's demands thus remained somewhat outside of what was considered truly revolutionary and were not celebrated in secondary literature in the successive period in the way which the pathos of calls to revolution have been memorised. Most demands which women put forward when striking were directly related to their present working conditions. In a strike in the *Arav* factory, for example, this included a fourfold increase of women's wages which also specified the concrete amounts requested for women at different positions; for dismissals to be completely abolished as a practice; for the 8-hour workday to be strictly adhered to; good manners towards the workers; and finally, for the workers' commission to be recognised.[77] In the *Rhodopi* tobacco cooperative the demands of women strikers included higher wages, no firing of workers; free medical care; better hygienic conditions; decent treatment on the side of employers; a shorter working day; and once again, the recognition of the workers' committee[78]. After several woman workers were arbitrarily fired, women in the Italian Regie announced a strike which apart from demanding the re-employment of the fired ones, required that there are no further reductions of wages and no dismissals on any pretext. Their demands also included the firing of the foreman who had beaten up one woman worker; the complete elimination of harassment in the warehouse and the recognition of the strike committee[79].

[77] *Rabotnichka* IV (22) (25 June 1932), p. 1
[78] *Rabotnichka* IV (29) (17 August 1932), p. 1
[79] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IV (35) (8 October 1932), p. 1

These demands all directly address the working conditions which women find themselves in. Importantly, they also address the gendered aspects of their experience at work, as is visible from the reiterated insistence on the elimination of harassment from the warehouses and on 'good manners' from management and the factory owners. As compared to strikes by both men and women (examples of which are present on the pages of *Tiutiunorabotnik*), they lack a 'revolutionary' spirit calling for the complete overthrow of the system, which was a trademark of radical and revolutionary writing in male-dominated periodicals (as well as other materials such as strike bulletins[80]). Women's demands tend to be more precise and addressing a higher number of concrete issues which they would like to be addressed. What they are asking for is not characterised by a lesser imagination for a world without oppression, exploitation and violence, but it does diverge from the (masculinist) version of revolutionary politics commonly found in articles addressing both men and women or exclusively men and is tendentiously less celebrated in leftist writing and discourse in general. As pointed out at the beginning of this section, Salin (2014) has argued that (often spontaneous) direct action which tended to be women's preferred method of collective action can be seen as a more radical militant method as opposed to relying on theory and strategy-building. For her it is so because direct action has the capacity of rupturing the status quo. Building on her argument, I would like to suggest that the concrete demands made by women as recorded in the two papers which might appear 'within' the present societal order and hence reformist, challenge the status quo in a profound manner which broad conceptualisations of the long-awaited revolution fall short of doing.

[80] See CDA, f. 166, which is dedicated to communist strike bulletins

6.3. Women in the organised struggle: "Only the organised power of men and women workers can break down the masters' and police's terror!"[81]

It is not possible to estimate the proportion of women tobacco workers who were union members. However, the majority of women were definitely not organised in unions throughout the whole period. A large part of the articles in all three newspapers point to women's 'insufficient' organisation, and in some of them unorganised women are even directly blamed for the lack of success of the organised struggle. In this part, I look at instances of women acting as part of the organised workers' movement and sketch out the boundaries of their possibilities for action.

Judging from the variety of accounts narrating organised women's attempts at standing up to their employers, it seems to be the case that as part of workers' organisations, they managed to safeguard their labour rights to an extent but overall there are not many articles describing instances of workers' success. However, the extent to which their successful struggles were *due to* their participation in these organisations that they were successful is up for debate. This issue will be explored in the section which follows. Apart from the actions of organised women, the section will also explore the writers' attitudes towards their struggle present in the articles, which were ones of unanimous approval and frequently of glorifying their clashes with authorities.

When employers were faced with women's organised resistance, they sometimes had to concede to at least part of their demands. This most often happened as the result of strikes but, judging from the very few articles which discuss successful outcomes of strikes, it appears that overall strikes in individual factories and warehouses rarely brought a betterment in working women's situations.

[81] *Rabotnichka* IV (26) (28 July 1932), p. 2

One less frequently mentioned but significant feature of women's being part of the TWU was that the conditions in a given factory or warehouse were (at least sometimes) directly tied to whether there were organised workers in the enterprise. It was sometimes the case that the dismissal of organised women from work (which was a tactic employed by factory owners to avoid shows of discontent) would lead to an immediate worsening of working conditions for the remaining workers – as employers would trust that the lack of organisation in their enterprises would allow them to be even more careless with regard to the material conditions in factories and/or exploit workers even more heavily. In the Italian Regie in Sofia warehouses' owners had started warning workers that they would soon start working seven hours with the respective cut in their wages[82] which was a common practice in the autumn months before factories closed down for winter. So that this can happen smoothly, the owners had started firing all of the 'class-aware' women. "But the most wronged women workers of capital are starting to fight back", the writer – a woman worker, calls to her colleagues. The article does not give an account of a particular strike but makes a general statement and relates that more and more workers are "responding to the masters' offensive" with strikes. "And they meet the iron fist of the fascist police which is always there when the exploiters need protection." In the strike in the Italian Regie here were tens of fainted women workers, hundreds of beaten ones and some got arrested. The article finishes by praising "the great workers' struggle for more bread, hygienic conditions, humane behaviour, against the turning of our workplaces into police stations, against the firings and the harassment" and it stresses that the tobacco workers' only support are the class organisations.

In the *Prokopov* firm[83] once all of the organised women were purposefully fired, the working

[82] *Rabotnichka* IV (35) (8 October 1932), p. 1
[83] *Rabotnichka* IV (24) (8 July 1932), p. 3

conditions worsened and their pay became more irregular than previously. Other articles explicitly relate that organised women would be fired precisely before new more damaging policies would be introduced[84].

Organised women would sometimes try to warn everyone employed in a given enterprise of upcoming changes which would affect them negatively and would call everyone to join the TWU and prepare to face employers' attempts at exploiting them further. Such was the case in the Austrian Regie in Sofia where in the autumn organised women started warning that

> "the day will soon come when letters will be hung in the salons to warn that a 7 hour day is being introduced, along with a reduction in our wages. In spring the day was lengthened to 8 hours but the wages didn't increase. Women comrades, they reduced our wages several times and no one stopped them, they will do it again. Get ready to strike back! We need to prepare for the moment they announce the wage reductions, not like in spring when some wanted to go to the inspectorate, others wanted to choose a commission and a third group were leaving in horrified tears at the even bigger poverty which they would now face. Women workers, only our unity can halt the coming reductions."

Given their awareness of how certain situations might develop and their ability to predict employers' actions, it becomes explicable why employers would target them before instituting new policies – this points to organised women's influence in working spaces and the perceptible threat they posed to employers' interest.

In some instances, women's organised action was the only source of protection for women who were threatened with dismissal. In the Italian regie where over 450 women were employed in

[84] *Rabotnichka* IV (35) (8 October 1932), p. 1

1931, the owners tried to fire the worker Todorka Boneva[85] who was part of the TWU. Almost all women workers rose up to defend her on the same day (only 6 didn't). Because the workers insisted, Boneva wasn't fired. However, on the following day, the owners tried and failed to fire her again. On the following day, enraged by women's collective mutual support, they fired six new male workers and nine women, all of whom were organised in the union. This was the moment when the warning came that from the following week, they would work 7 hours with reduced wages. This caused great indignation amongst the women."They could see that the firing of all the women who had been standing up for them was precisely in order to make this happen more smoothly." On the next day, as a sign of protest, ten men left work. After lunch, the warehouse was blocked by police. All workers announced a strike. There was a clash with the police in front of the warehouse. A lot of women workers were severely beaten. When the worker Atanaska Hristova was arrested, the women workers nearby went together with her to the station and tried to open the doors and release their comrade. One worker said they wouldn't leave until Hristova was released; "they didn't get scared even when from the windows of the director's office the guards said they would make them go away with beatings and whips". Despite their resilience, they were ultimately dispersed by the armed policemen. Supporting the women were the children who were throwing stones on the policemen to save the arrested and beaten workers. In the meantime, at the warehouse over 20 women were carried out unconscious from the warehouse during the clash. Already on the same day, the strikers chose a committee of three women and two men and strike posts were also designated. While the outcome of the strike is unknown, what becomes visible through this account is the solidarity which appears to have existed among women (and not only). It is possible that the author has deliberately painted the

[85] *Rabotnichka* IV (35) (8 October 1932), p. 1

event in a more heroizing manner in order to highlight the importance of collective struggle, but even if so the events described testify to the willingness of women to support one another in moments of need.

One example of writers praising clashes with the authorities is an article on the *Rhodopi* tobacco cooperative, where 300 women went on strike because of their low wages and horrible working conditions, and especially the tobacco smell and moist in the salons which was making them ill[86]. The strike posts were in front of the factory making sure no strike-breakers can walk in when the police arrived and started hitting the posts with whips and the butts of their rifles. They 'savagely' jumped on the worker Limonka Ivanova, they tore her dress and took her to the station. The rest of the strikers who went to release their comrade had the same fate. One male worker was beaten up by his own brother who worked as a policeman, which was witnessed by their mother who fainted at the sight. The workers Penka Tomova, Mariyka Kyosleva, Kara Kerkeneva, Mara Kareva, Radka Shkretova, Zlatka Georgieva and others were also severely beaten. The writer addresses the coalition between employers and "protectors of order": "Sweat drinkers, you can't silence the just voice of the hungry! Our tuberculose spittle goes to the vicious traitors! Unprecedented enthusiasm imbues the strike, under the slogan: *Fight until the victory!*" This article presents a detailed account of the violence inflicted on the strikers by the police. The lengthy descriptions of separate cases of violence, the stress on the workers' attempts to resist and the refusal to leave their posts serve to glorify their struggle and celebrate their bravery and willingness for personal sacrifice which are presented as an inextricable part of organised resistance.

[86] *Rabotnichka* IV (29) (19 July 1932), p. 1

Sometimes it was the case that the police too would retract their actions as a result of women's collective outcry. An article in *Rabotnichka* was entitled "Faced with the organised pressure of workers, the police backs off"[87]. In the *Sveti Vrach* tobacco cooperation during a long strike a woman was arrested and taken away by the police. Her comrades started throwing stones at the police who had started beating them. After the woman was taken to the station, the rest of the strikers went there as well to protest her detention and under their pressure the police released the worker.

On certain occasions organised women's attempts at collective action were obstructed by the fact that not all workers in a certain enterprise were convinced they should take part in organised resistance. In the *Arav* factory in Sofia half of the women workers decided to strike[88]. The police started arresting strikers but let them go when workers gathered *en masse* in front of the station. Back at the factory, there was conflict between strikers and those who continued to work but the strike committee calmly talked to them and convinced them to join and in 4-5 days everyone was on strike. After a few days of striking, the first ones to join the strike (who were also the youngest) started finding other jobs, and the coordination of the strike was taken up by a second strike committee, "of which even elderly women were becoming members". Women workers from other warehouses started sending in money for the solidarity kitchen organised to support the strikers. Some of the strikers were going to other warehouses to ask for help via money or joining the strike. The unemployed didn't come in to replace the striking workers. However, according to the writer, one big mistake was allowed to happen: three workers accepted to unload the tobacco that arrived at the warehouse, thus agreeing to work despite being on strike. In addition, the local party branch had up until the point of writing done nothing to support the

[87] *Rabotnichka* IV (26) (28 July 1932), p. 2
[88] *Rabotnichka* IV (22) (25 June 1932), p. 1

strikers. “It is especially the women comrades [party members] who should have taken their place [in the strike] by now!”, she exclaims. This article and a few others point to instances in which women tobacco workers received the support of women from other warehouses – it was probably the case that them being part of the organised workers’ movement made these connections easier to establish and women in the organisations were possibly more readily available to help their comrades in other enterprises because of their previous experience and their access to already existing structures which might have been able to facilitate such processes.

That no unemployed women went in to replace the striking workers was also likely a sign of solidarity in the struggle. In all three newspapers there are articles which call for the unemployed to organise as well and to stand in solidarity with the rest of the working class – one article in *Rabotnichka*, for example, proposes that unemployed workers should fight for the creation of a committee of unemployed workers adjacent to every local Labour Inspectorate[89].

This article is unusual in that it expresses a critical attitude towards the Party and its lack of interest in supporting the striking women. It puts the responsibility especially (although not exclusively) on women party members. There is an implicit suggestion that only because they are women *too*, they should be more engaged with the struggle of other women than men – a common unstated belief among communists in the period and beyond it. The latter is visible both in some of the articles considered here[90] and in secondary sources from the socialist period concerning the development of the revolutionary women’s movement (for example Bradinska 1969; Vodenicharova and Popova 1972).

[89] *Rabotnichka* IV (39) (6 December 1932), p. 1

[90] In an article in *Rabotnichka*, for example, it is women party members in particular who are held responsible for not supporting a local strike of women workers (*Rabotnichka* IV (22) (25 June 1932), p. 1)

This article is also exceptional in that it is the only one which involves a description of direct interaction between organised and unorganised women – while most articles are directed at those outside of the organised struggle, there is almost no record of organised women tobacco workers conversing with their unorganised colleagues about their common struggle. Another article in *Tiutiunorabotnik* points to the dangers of agitating while at work[91] by telling the story of a female worker who was sacked after three days of work because she was found to be agitating people to join the TWU. Arguably, the stakes involved in agitating were also higher for women than for men in some respects, in that their labour was a lot more precarious, their contracts shorter (if existent at all), and their wages significantly lower. Women union members who used their workspaces to agitate among their colleagues could have therefore lacked other opportunities to converse with unorganised women workers. Alternatively, they were dedicated to the cause to the extent where the risk of being fired and of having difficulties finding future employment were risks they were willing to take, or – as discussed above – they could sometimes rely on the support of their fellow workers who would at least try to the best of their ability to make sure agitators for the union wouldn't lose their jobs.

6.4. Unorganised women's militancy and collective action

Unorganised women are present in all three newspapers as both a desired readership and as actors in the stories related by contributors. They are the addressees of most articles, even though most of the copies of the newspapers actually went to subscribers (who were presumably part of the union). Their representation is often paradoxical: while they are constantly being told that

[91] *Rabotnichka* IX (19) (date illegible, April 1932), p. 4

without joining the organised struggle they don't have a way out of their miserable conditions, they also acted in impressive solidary ways which sometimes managed to secure the protection of their rights. The newspapers have records of many such instances, but, almost invariably, the authors refrain from praising unorganised women for their collective action in the name of insisting that without the support of the union, their situation is bound to remain the same.

Most articles which discuss unorganised women workers present them as insufficiently capable of standing up for themselves, insisting that their only pathway to achieving better working conditions is via their joining the union. "Unorganised women workers need to understand that as long as they stray away from their tobacco workers' organisation, they will be a toy in the hands of the masters. It's time that they wake up and organise"[92], states one article in *Ravenstvo* – and this is the general tone which the newspapers use when addressing unorganised women. Furthermore, they are often held responsible for the failures of strikes – one article, for example, ends by saying that abuses of power are possible because the female workers are still unorganised and powerless in fighting their exploiters[93], and sometimes they are even held responsible for holding back the whole workers' movement. As the examples below will show, however, unorganised women participated in collective action in a variety of ways, complicating the straightforward narrative presented by the newspapers in various ways.

In most of the stories told women workers stand up to injustice in a spontaneous manner and defend their coworkers – one example is a case in a factory in the town of Dupnitsa where a woman worker, Spasula Mircheva, was fired without justification[94]. As a response and a sign of protest, many other women workers who were, importantly, not part of the union, quit their jobs

[92] *Ravenstvo* III (20) (20 February 1922), p. 3
[93] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 3
[94] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 4

and started working elsewhere. The owner then went after them with a proposal of a 3-4 leva wage increase because his factory couldn't continue functioning, to which they agreed. The author curiously sees the moral of the story as the following: "unorganised workers will continue to be toys in the hands of masters"[95] until they join the union. The unorganised took collective action and not only secured their employment but also came back to work for better pay. However, they received no praise for this – the author shows no recognition of these women's success. Not only is there no recognition of what they achieved – the focus falls entirely on the initial situation (of the precarious worker being fired) which instigated the subsequent events; and what is pointed to as the lesson is that it would have been avoided had the worker been organised.

On other occasions unorganised women's collective action didn't lead to the expected results most often, it seems, because of lack of preparation but organised workers would offer their support in the form of advice and chances of success would increase. In the *Prokopov* firm whose case was already briefly mentioned in the first section, were employed 150 women, and only a couple of men[96]. Their working conditions were horrible, and so was the treatment they were receiving from their higher-ups; they also weren't being told what wages they're working for. The owner with the help of the foreman found out exactly who the organised women are and found a pretext to fire all of them. "The unorganised women didn't realise the importance of organising in the factory at the time and didn't do anything to stand up for their fired comrades". This is when their conditions worsened: instead of wages, the owner started giving random amounts of money to the workers "as an advance". Every day the workers grew more and more discontent and finally their discontent turned into a strike. It was a spontaneous one – in the

[95] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (4) (5 January 1922), p. 4
[96] *Rabotnichka* IV (24) (8 July 1932), p. 3

words of the author – "completely unorganised, there wasn't even a conference before it to make their demands concrete and clear, and to choose a committee to present the demands to the owner". The author describes how the events unfolded – women went separately to argue with the owner and the foreman. Then, the police got immediately involved and tried to break the strike, both with threats and promises that they would make the owner pay them; telling them that they just need to stop striking because this is "communist business". Because of how fragmented the strike was, some workers almost believed them. At this point, a group from the neighbouring warehouse interfered by organising a meeting of the strikers to explain to them "the way" in which strikes are organised effectively. A committee was then chosen and their demands were synchronised – "and to their unity and closeness the master couldn't show resistance". He accepted their demands already on the second day. "In this struggle the women got to see how difficult it is to strike without being organised and what it means to have an organisation to bravely and correctly lead the struggle". In the end, the author stresses that this gave the unorganised women a chance to evaluate their mistake when they remained silent when the organised workers were fired and the harmful consequences of their staying away from *their* organisations. This article clearly aims to convey that it is only through being organised in the union that women can lead a successful struggle. However, what made their collective action successful was not their getting closer to unionising but rather the solidary help of other women with more experience in the struggle – that the latter were part of the union was not a leading factor in the positive outcome for the unorganised women at *Prokopov*, what made a difference was their sharing of previous experience with women who had not been in this situation before.

Another strike which took place in the *Arav* factory in Sofia failed "precisely because of the lack of good organisation"[97]. The author discusses the reasons for which, according to them, the strike had failed – firstly, the fact that workers weren't organised and therefore hadn't prepared before taking action. Secondly, it is highlighted that it was very hesitant workers (male and female) who were chosen as a committee.

> "Mara Boshkova who led the workers was completely at the masters' service. She wanted to be good both to the workers and the masters. This Janus-faced disposition failed the struggle. Of course, it was on purpose that she let a few traitors (f) into the strike so that she could later tell the striking women 'Do whatever you want.'"

The workers condemned the committee's actions but didn't agree to change it "because there weren't others to replace them who knew how to speak up". And when Boshkova was offended by what was said and wanted to leave the committee, the women said "you'll stay, you've started leading us, you won't leave us now." The author reprimands the workers' attitude: "instead of getting rid of them, the workers made the committee stay at any cost and drive the fight to failure". The resolution of the story is that the committee leader Boshkova, along with 3-4 traitors, remained employed at the warehouse, and none of the other workers weren't accepted to work. Here, an important issue surfaces, that of having the ability to speak out and to confront those in power. The writer argues that the workers found themselves in this situation because they were not organised, but this is a contestable point – on many occasions unorganised women were perfectly able to raise their voices and articulate their discontent.

[97] *Rabotnickhka* IV (25) (19 July 1932), p. 4

In the *Tatar* factory in Pazardzhik[98], for example, the owners said they would only employ unorganised workers. Some women did join under this condition, but soon after they "understood what that would mean"[99] and the second time the warehouse opened, they made it a condition that all future workers are employed from the union section and the employers were forced to concede to this demand. "With heroism inherent only to the organised worker and the youth", writes the author, "they resigned when the master refused to recognise the section"[100]. Only an hour after the newly-created committee had communicated this condition to the owner, they were called back in as representatives of their organisation, the owner having agreed to their demand. The article highlights how this victory shows the power of collective action and, like all others discussed, finishes with a call for unionising. This is one of the few articles which presents a story with a successful outcome for the workers, and the victory in question can hardly be credited to the union. The writer presents the heroism which the women exhibited as "inherent only to the organised worker" which is peculiar given that the women had only just joined the union lines. The choice to do so indicates the writer's aim to present the role of the union as decisive, when in reality it did not play a significant role in these women's success. Showing appreciation for this impressive show of solidarity among unorganised women would contradict the main purpose of the article: to convince unorganised workers that their only option for real change is through joining the union.

An article talking about the *Kartel* factory in Plovdiv, and specifically about the department in which cigarette boxes are produced, provides invaluable insight into unorganised women's capacity for independent organisation. There, 30-40 'girl workers' are employed, half of whom

[98] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (21-22) (15 October 1921), p. 6
[99] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (21-22) (15 October 1921), p. 6
[100] *Tiutiunorabotnik* IX (21-22) (15 October 1921), p. 6

are aged 10-12 and get paid only 15 leva a day. The writer notes that most of them have already developed tuberculosis. The girls who are over 18 get paid 30-40 leva for excessively hard piecework. The high prices, she writes, have made them "think more seriously"[101]. They created a committee with workers picked from amongst themselves, and the chosen ones went to the director to ask for a 35% pay rise. The director "had the benevolence to add an additional 5 leva to the wages of the oldest ones" while at the same time giving them more work than before – "which means that not only did he not raise their wages but he actually lowered them". When the committee went to him a second time, he responded with "But I gave you a rise already?" They tried a final third time and this time he lost his temper: "Go away you dirty women! I'll give you nothing!" At 4 p.m. the same day, a spontaneous strike erupted and all of the women went to the People's House[102]. Amongst all of them two workers didn't join, "one of whom [a male] broad socialist[103] who remains a traitor, working in the factory." Six days later the director accepted the demands of the striking workers – to comply with the 8-hour working day; to raise their wages by 35%, and finally, he recognised the workers' commission. Unlike all other articles of the kind in *Tiutiunorabotnik,* this one does not have a long didactic finale. Rather, it ends celebrating female militancy: "Long live the growing consciousness of women workers." The account of the strike in the *Kartel* factory exhibits the significant influence which unorganised women workers could have when standing up to their employers. Through planning and coordinating their actions they managed to carry out a successful strike with high demands all of which were met.

[101] *Tiutiunorabotnik* X (22-23) (29 October 1921), p. 6
[102] It does not become clear exactly what the People's House is but it seems likely that it was a gathering place for unionised workers, perhaps the headquarters of the Common Union. Its mention is followed by the following statement in brackets: "they [these workers] know where their interests will be defended".
[103] Member of the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party

Overall, women who were not part of union structures took a variety of actions collectively which often had successful results. More relevant than their success, however, is the fact that in many ways they undertook actions similar to those of women who were union members. The strict separation made by the articles' authors between these two groups of women workers is therefore somewhat misleading. It is understandably guided by the agitational rhetoric employed in the press whose main purpose is to attract women to join the union. By drawing this dividing line between organised and unorganised, 'class aware' women and 'women without consciousness', however, the separation which characterized the articles in all journals creates the false impression that the two groups behaved in opposing ways: one working towards the progressive cause of working-class liberation, and one holding the movement back. This is for sure partly an effect of writers' employment of agitational rhetoric, but it is worth paying attention to the fact that the latter is imbued by the masculinist perception of the only 'proper' struggle being that of workers in the unions. The 'proper' struggle, in turn, is defined by striving precisely towards the goals established by the union and in the way prescribed by it. A lot of working women's acts of collective resistance can only be found when reading the sources against the grain – and it appears safe to assume that there were a multitude of instances of unorganised women's collective action which did not make it to the newspapers' pages, precisely because they didn't fit pre-established understandings of what counts as 'valid' resistance.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has engaged in a study of women tobacco workers in the communist press in Bulgaria in the period between 1919 and 1932. It has specifically focused on three communist publications, one of which aimed specifically at tobacco workers (*Tiutiunorabotnik*) and the other two, specifically at women workers (*Ravenstvo* and *Rabotnichka*) and articles within them who address the struggles of women tobacco workers. Throughout the thesis, perspectives of womanhood and women's struggles present in the newspapers have been analysed, as well as the role of the authors in constructing these. At the beginning of this thesis I posed the following questions: How was women workers' experience at work gendered? What can these articles and their presence in communist newspapers tell us about these women's position in relation to and struggles in the male-dominated spaces of party politics and union organizing? In relation to other working women? What can the existence and contents of these entries tell us about the Bulgarian unionized workers' movement relationship to working women? The three analytical chapters of the thesis have approached these questions from different angles.

In the first chapter, I considered the topic of women's working conditions, taking a broad view of working conditions as encompassing issues of material conditions, pay, working hours, etc. but also the ways in which women in the spaces of the warehouses and factories were treated as gendered subjects. The navigation of the world of waged labour for working women involved being dismissed for reasons pertaining to their being perceived *as women*, as well as facing sexual harassment and assault, among other things. Based on my findings, I have proposed that the concept of precarity needs to be reconsidered in light of how marginalising and oppressive gendered structures play a central role in both how precarity is experienced and what it consists of.

While precarity manifests most visibly precisely through its economic capacity which is for sure the most easily measurable one, it in fact encompasses experiences which go beyond the economic realm, and which are partly definitive of its economic expression as well. The role of categories such as gender, race, sexuality and ability are thus as important for its constitution as is its economic dimension. This chapter thus contributes to the long-standing discussion of the history of gender and labour which has been engaged in reconsidering labour-related concepts in light of their gendered nature.

In the second chapter, I focused on the ways in which women who contributed to the newspapers discussed other women workers. I analysed the discursive separation between organised and unorganised workers which was commonly construed and suggested that it potentially served as a source of alienation for unorganised women. I further suggest that the differences between organised and unorganised women were exaggerated for agitational purposes while in reality, judging from the events described in a lot of the articles, their modes of resistance and rates of success resembled each other significantly. The presence of the notion of motherhood in the articles was then considered to highlight that while discussions of women's relationship to motherhood tended to reify an essentialist view of women as mothers, instances of evoking motherhood were extremely rare. Consequently, I looked at how some women were constructed as exceptionally brave but that authors did not pose unorganised women as antagonistic to them. Even on occasions when they acted out of uncertainty and fear, they were not belittled or scolded by the authors of the articles discussing them. After this, I explored the ways in which respectability and honour are present in the articles through the figure of the beggar and the notion of honour. The manner in which working women's bodies were perceived by their higher-ups is then discussed, exhibiting how their transgressions of what was deemed appropriate (such

as having one's legs on the working table) reveal ideas about gender and class during the period. Then, the reflections of women writers on their own positions at the workplace and in wider society are analysed, through a focus on instances in which the writers showed their self-identification with the groups they represented. Finally, women's activism in relation to issues beyond their workplaces is explored, as well as their petitioning for policy changes which affected them directly. By framing the discussion of the representations of working women with a discussion of feminist periodical studies, this chapter contributes to the field by suggesting that a move away from the focus on authorship can provide useful insights for scholarly work within the field.

The last analytical chapter considered instances of women's collective action. In it, I analysed women's tendency to go forward with very concrete demands which did not rely on calls to revolution as opposed to demands put forward by men or in cases of mixed strikes. The concreteness of their demands showed that women envisioned a better future in concrete terms which remained uncelebrated because it did not fall into established revolutionary discourse while it was, in a sense, even more revolutionary precisely because it proposed a detailed idea of how a radically different better future could be achieved. I also critically evaluated the correlation between women's participation in the union and the success of their struggles as available in the newspapers and argued that instances of successful struggle were not necessarily thanks to union participation. Although union participation was certainly beneficial in many respects (especially considering the support of the organisation in case of sudden dismissal or illness), the rate of success of women's acts of collective resistance in the form of strikes or making the decision to quit collectively doesn't seem to have been higher among organised women, despite the contributors' reassurances that it was only their union who could protect

workers. This chapter contributes to the literature on women's participation in unions by providing a perspective which considers simultaneously organised women's perception of their struggle and analysis of the positions of both organised and unorganised women in relation to the workers' movement as present in women's accounts.

As a whole, this thesis contributes to debates within feminist and global labour history, feminist periodical studies. Importantly, it starts to fill in a big gap in Bulgarian historiography which, as discussed in the literature review, has in the last 30 years strayed away from discussing issues of labour. In this sense, this thesis also contributes to the otherwise growing field of women's and gender history in Bulgaria by starting to address the history of women workers which to this day remains a largely unexplored field. In relation to this and by way of conclusion, I would like to bring in a reflection by Dorothy Sue Cobble who raises the important issue of the researcher's vantage point. She recalls her participation at a European Social History Conference where she observed how historians from richer, particularly English-speaking countries define their mission as 'global', whereas presenters from smaller countries were focused on writing their own histories, and their work had no claims to span the globe (Cobble 2012: 104). For her this points to the need to ask the question of who gets to write global labour history and who gets to define the global. She points to the relative advantage in this respect not only of scholars with more cultural and social capital, but ones whose own 'national' histories have already been explored from multiple perspectives. I would expand her point to assert that writing these national (as well as indigenous) histories which still haven't been written is not any less purposeful and useful than partaking in an effort to contribute to a global labour history. And while, as maintained by van der Linden, microhistories can also be examples of global labour history (Van der Linden 2012: 63) (and by extension, national ones as well), there is certainly the necessity in these cases

to consider phenomena which do not fall into a global 'way of thinking', which does not mean they are not forward-looking. Indeed, such studies might provide new imaginative and insightful ways of relating global labour history to other fields and expanding global labour history's scope further. Showing the importance of reconstructing local pasts while at the same time thinking through concepts and phenomena which are relevant across borders is precisely what I hope to have achieved with this thesis.

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IV (29) (17 August 1932), p. 1 - Borbata protiv voinata nyama da spre. The anti-war fight won't stop. *Anonymous*

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IV (30) (26 July 1932), p. 4 - Za higienata v klona na avstr. Rezhiya. *Woman worker.*
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IV (37) (17 November 1932), p. 4 - V tiutiunevata fabrika “Pashoolu”. *Ot rabotnichki.* In the Pashoolu tobacco factory. *By women workers*
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