

# Feminism in the USSR

BY NINA BELYAEVA

The idea of conducting even a cursory opinion poll was dropped as soon as they heard the word “feminism.” Even the most energetic and enlightened women advocates of *perestroika* looked disgusted: “who needs feminism?” The young, pretty ones pursed their lips in a particularly offended way. Feminism, after all, is meant to compensate acrimonious and worried women for the failures in their personal life. A real woman should be surrounded by admiring men; women’s affairs are for those who can’t do anything else. Besides the word itself smacks of the indecent, the shameful; I wouldn’t be surprised if many associated it with lesbianism. [Editor’s note: The editorial board of *CWS/cf* wishes to make it clear that it does not endorse homophobic statements in any way. This statement has been published as it was submitted as a reflection of the work still to be done for the rights of lesbians and all marginalized people.]

Only recently I, too, would have derided the proposal to discuss feminism. Why? Where does this image — bright, slovenly, raucous, with blunt gestures and bugging eyes and with cigarette smoke, a small but vociferous procession of women declaring war on the opposite sex — come from? Who shoved it into my subconscious? Who needs feminism, whose official stock epithet is “bourgeois” — to be seen this way?

Feminism is immensely important. The absence of an independent, organized, active role for women in politics is the result of a totalitarian past that paralyzed our lives.

By raising the “iron curtain,” by opening our borders to global processes, we have rediscovered charity, philanthropy, and the

environmental and human rights movements. Next is the women’s movement. Amazingly, the immense force of Western and world history is practically non-existent in our vast civilized country.

What should the women’s movement do? What values does feminism proclaim today? Feminism is the women who not only sense the unfair, inequitable attitudes towards them, but who undertake, as their dignity demands, to resolve these issues — without waiting for permission.

“It’s hard to deal with your [Soviet] representatives at international meetings,” said feminist Bella Abzug, one of America’s first women politicians. “They keep saying: ‘we don’t need feminism. The Soviet State has provided us with everything we need.’” Indeed, our legislation is progressive, but can we accept the State’s limited concern for us?

Yes, we have the right to abortion — something which amazes American women — but with what wild pain, tears and humiliation. Yes, we have free maternity hospitals — if you discount the gifts to doctors and nurses — but they are breeding grounds for infection. What Soviet woman wouldn’t be happy to give birth in America and pay — however much it costs — for normal conditions and a healthy child.

Yes, we have State-subsidized nursery schools, but what mother doesn’t dream of a retired granny or nurse to take care of her child, so as not to hear the pediatrician drone: “Nothing in particular, just the normal nursery school cough.”

Yes, in the West there is a bourgeois state to which the working people’s interests are alien. But it does not pretend to



solve all social problems: it grants the minimum — won by the women's movement there — and then steps aside: everything else is your problem.

This is when social movements arise and do what the state is unable — or reluctant — to do.

Our resources are also very limited. So why didn't the same scheme work here? Why hasn't a women's movement arisen in our country? Elvira Novikova, member of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, answers:

*Feminism is a movement of free, creative individuals, produced by the entire system of culture. We have traditionally glorified motherhood as women's main and principal function. The hardship of having to combine productive labour and their role in the family is solved very simply — by sending women back to the family. This isn't emancipation, but the worst kind of slavery — depriving women of their professional lives and dooming them to serve their families, to play a dependent role.*

*At the beginning of this century, in pre-revolutionary Russia, a movement of aristocratic women known as "Equality" tried to foster this idea among women workers. But as early as 1903, the nascent party and trade unions realized the immense potential force of the female proletarian masses and the Communist Party (then known as the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party) incorporated practically all their demands in its program. Thus women's democratic proletarian consciousness developed in the framework of the partisan movement — not independently.*

Larisa Kuznetsova, philologist and author of books on women in the USSR said,

*No women's movement could have simply existed in our country. For this you must be aware of yourself as an independent person, you must identify your own requirements as women, whereas in the haste of revolutionary renewal the human being was examined in general, as part of the masses, as the "builder of a new society." In our thinking, we visualized people as a single monolith: all workers. Add to this the totalitarian mentality, governed by catchwords and the beat of the drum, and our religious readiness to believe*

*anything you like, accept it and say that "everything is fine."*

*... Women have been manipulated throughout most of our history. Put on tractors, or on steam engines, or dropped out of planes with parachutes; in the 1960s they were called to the factories, and now, with the draft of the new law, we are driving them back into the kitchen. Spiritual food and values have always been offered from without. From ready-made recipes. And Soviet women used to be happy — one and all. We won't have any women's movement until women have the chance to stop this race, to concentrate on themselves, to understand and hear their own voices.*

In the late 1970s in Leningrad, Tatyana Mamonova, Yulia Voznesenskaya, Natalya Malakhovskaya, Tatyana Goricheva and other like-minded women — artists, poets, philologists, translators — who were able to see the humiliating, defenseless condition of Soviet women, tried to conceptualize the reason for it and to find ways of emancipating women's consciousness. They started an almanac called *Zhenshchiny i Rossiya* (Women and Russia) and a magazine called *Rossiyanka* (Russia's Woman) and then a club known as Maria which published a theological magazine of the same name, in an effort to combine women's liberation with the idea of Christianity. The group was short-lived. In May and June 1980, just before the Summer Olympics in Moscow, all of its organizers were expelled from the USSR on charges of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. Evidently, our representatives at international congresses were right — we didn't need feminism. Or perhaps our State didn't?

How did Soviet women find Larisa Kuznetsova and propel her into politics?

*They found me through my articles, through the editorial offices of New Times weekly. They invited me to "meet my readers" over a cup of tea, at home, in Zhukovsky, near Moscow. Then they officially invited me to join their women's council and suggested I become their candidate. It's surprising how accurately they grasped the situation and formulated their missions; they knew what they wanted and I followed them.*

The news that the women's council (headed by Olga Bessolova) at the Central Aerodynamic Institute had nominated its own, independent candidates to run in the elections to the Supreme Soviet came like a bolt from the blue. Resuscitated women's

councils were a sensation. They decided to soberly assess the situation in society as a whole, to understand women's part in it, and set themselves feasible tasks. They organized lectures and meetings with electors. They were registered as "women's councils" in their city, and when they were turned down at the regional level, they organized meetings and collected signatures in Reutovo, Pushchino, Zagorsk and Zhukovsky, towns not far from Moscow.

This was the first women-sponsored election campaign and even if it didn't end in success, it was an invaluable experience politically. Deeper insight was gained into immediate and longer-term objectives, and the need for an independent organization. Such an organization was set up and is now known as the Women's Initiatives Club, attached to the Fund of Social Initiatives in Moscow's Sevastopolsky District.

The club arranges lectures and discussions, teaches self-help techniques, and explores job opportunities. If we ever write a history of the Soviet women's movement, it will begin with this election campaign in the Moscow Region.

What do we have today? What is the future of the movement?

Olga Voronina's group, Lotus, consists of women scientists dealing with the "women's question" in professional terms — from the division of labour in society into traditionally "male" and "female" roles, to specific sociological studies of how women work. Lotus stands for liberation from social stereotypes through internal discussions, exchange of ideas and new information. Although each member works on her own topic, Lotus feels like a close-knit collective, open to everyone who shares their convictions.

Tatyana Ryabikina's association, Women's Creative Effort, promotes its members' creative talents and abilities in every field of artistic, literary and humanitarian endeavour. The association is composed of members of creative unions, professionals, and anyone else who wants to improve her skills in a creative sphere or help others to do so. Founding members include all the creative unions, the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, the Cultural Foundation and the Soviet Women's Committee.

The most organized, legally, group is the Preobrazheniye (Transfiguration) women's club, formed by Diana Medman in the system of the Academy of Sciences. The club's rules have been registered, it has been granted the right to a judicial

person, and it has a current bank account. Its aim is to promote women's personal, spiritual and civil interests, and also to "enhance women's role and initiative... in the socio-cultural spheres." The club champions women's self-development and children's programs: children's art studios and logopedic centres are already in operation. Preobrazheniye has branches in Rostov and Leningrad and finances its own programs.

Olga Lipovskaya, of Leningrad, publishes the only *samizdat* (hand-typed; unofficial) magazine for women, *Zhenskoye Chteniye* (Women's Reading). The first issues contained poems, short stories, editorials, articles by Western feminists and excerpts from the *Zhenshchiny i Rossiya* almanac. Coming to the women's movement from the human rights movement, Olga maintains that woman's condition cannot be seriously improved without restructuring the entire social system.

Olga's assistant, Nonna Odintsova, handles the magazine's contributors in Moscow. Besides looking for material, she plans to bring out — with assistance from the Transfiguration club — a typeset almanac for women. A professional translator, Nonna wants it to be more in the nature of *les belles lettres*.

And what about Olga Bessolova's women's council? In its new role as a socio-political, civic women's association, it still fulfills all the old functions of a traditional women's council — to assist, demand, procure, distribute. "There is no escaping from this," Olga sighs.

*After all, the women who elected us expect help, which is why we must deal with canteens, recreation rooms, order departments, as well as women's working conditions, broader benefits for mothers in next year's collective agreement, and school education. We have to patch up holes, do other people's work — too much effort is spent in vain. And yet the women's councils are an established structure and must be used.*

In an interview with a local factory newspaper Olga said:

*We are discussing the establishment of a union of women's councils in Russia's scientific centres, an association of women engineers, a union of mothers, a movement for biologically clean products for children... It is vital that women be able to influence the country's most serious decisions. Maybe then the balance will be tipped in favour of the family, the child, the human being.*

Only after meeting feminists — the bourgeois ones from the West — did I realize that I had always subscribed to their views. Given my convictions and mode of life, I belong to this movement. Many others, upon learning more about the movement, will see themselves in a new light, too.

No matter what extreme forms Western feminism may take, it is ridiculous to divorce oneself from it with old dogmas. Still, it may be a while before the ordinary Soviet woman is able to say with pride: "I am a feminist."

A confessed feminist, my intention is not to make war on men or women who do not subscribe to these views. To have a comfortable home, to be a hospitable hostess — aren't these worthy ideals? It's just that I have different ideals. May I? Mine are professionalism, creative endeavour, self-development, social responsibility.

In the evenings my five-year-old son and I make his favourite pancakes, but I am sure that I will give him immeasurably more if I manage to fulfill myself as a scholar, as a journalist-lawyer-activist. Can I give my son the whole world if I only look out the kitchen window? It is our duty to hand over the whole world to our children, not just to provide them with a good supper, a prestigious after school study group, and a tutor "from a good family."

We can teach children to be fair and generous if we ourselves are confident managers — free, assured and strong. And this will not detract from our kindness or tenderness. The airy veil of feminism looks even better on proudly raised heads.

So is it possible for us to have feminism without blushing with shame? Are we afraid of words? Let it then be a "women's movement." My learned female friends do not share my optimism concerning the possibility of a women's movement in our country. These groups, I was told, still amount to a drop in the bucket — with few members and without clear goals or independence. Besides, these are all intellectual clubs, they say. Meanwhile, most women come home so exhausted from work that they haven't got the energy to care about clubs or "movements."

Shortages mean ever-growing queues and more time spent on shopping, plus gloomy economic forecasts and the need to keep the family in good order.

So, perhaps feminism is only for the well-fed societies? When there is enough at home, one can find time for a social movement. The traditional logic — that

of both the Supreme Soviet and the government — is this: when the country gets better, things will be easier for women, too. But maybe the reverse will be true? The country cannot extricate itself from its predicament until women are involved in the changes. Otherwise a rush forward will be beyond the strength of both agriculture, which employs mostly women, who over-strain themselves as always, and industry, where more than half the women, seeing no prospects for professional growth, do their work in a slipshod manner.

It is hardly worth expecting the situation to change unless we begin changing it ourselves — doing this in our own, womanly way: not by war cries and cavalry assaults, not by setting up commissions and subcommittees, but by specific, gradual steps; by putting the society being restructured in order, like a house after repairs.

Maybe it is the female vision that statesmen lack? Isn't war meaningless and brutal, and policy more often inhumane, because both were exclusively the work of men? And the centrally directed economy — doesn't it come from the male habit of giving orders? And the whole of the administrative system — doesn't it stem from the male desire to reign supreme? It will be objected that women in politics are notorious for their conservatism — but that's because they are an exception there, and in order to fight their way into a male-dominated system, women need to outdo men at their own game. If this competition is removed, women may come to politics with their own set of values. *Perestroika* lacks the woman's point of view. It is not women's hands that are missing, but women's minds — flexible and practical; women's sensitivity, wit, ability to make ends meet with next to nothing; their compassion and readiness to cooperate. Women must be enabled to prove their mettle and demonstrate their organizing abilities if they are to be ready and available to be elected to the Supreme Soviet.

Though there are still no signs of a mass movement, the first women's associations have appeared. They will foster leaders, public figures and politicians with a female face. Then women shall have a place in the social hierarchy worthy of our intellect, experience, education and creativity. Women will occupy this place not by "battling their way" into it, but by naturally imparting their womanhood upon society. Maybe then society will also understand that wherever women flourish, the nation stands to gain.