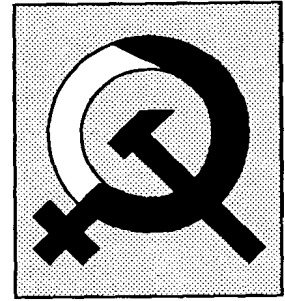


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# "THE WOMAN QUESTION" PRACTICE AND POLICY



## Public Rights and Personal Interests

BY LYUDMILA AROOTTUNYAN

**B**iological statistics indicate that Nature has given women a better chance in life than men. On average, in childhood, girls fall ill and die less often than boys; girls grow up more quickly and find it easier to cope with the adversities of life; they cause themselves and others less harm; and women live longer. But, so far, social opportunities have been more favourable for men.

The idea of social equality, promulgated in the USSR in the early years of Soviet government, as well as the declaration of equal rights for men and women, envisaged a comprehensive program for creating conditions which would guarantee those rights in everyday life. We have achieved a great deal in this field since then. However, rapid progress has changed our ideas of social equality and has drawn public attention to the question of equal opportunities for men and women and freedom to choose a way of life.

Social equality is manifested in many ways, but most clearly in the rights and opportunities of men and women in social and industrial areas as well as in the family.

### Freedom to Choose a Profession

Today women account for more than half the people employed in the Soviet economy. The development of health services, public education, communal services and amenities has to a considerable extent depended on their work. Women are also successful in science, culture, industry, and agriculture. On the whole, the range of fields in which women work keeps extending.

While discussing careers for women, however, we come across quite a number of problems. Women account for 60 percent of professionals with a higher or specialized secondary education, yet there are few women among leading officials. Women account for a mere 12 percent of the heads of industrial enterprises, and 2 percent of the full members and corresponding

members of the Academy of Sciences. A number of social, economic, and psychological reasons are behind this.

Sociological research has shown that women use their equal opportunities with men to make a good career start, which the Soviet social system will grant them. They pass competitive examinations to universities and other higher schools and account for more than 50 percent of students at these institutions. The most sophisticated among them master all professions. They read more and are more purposeful than men. So, at the start, women apparently have more chances to make a successful career. Nonetheless, in the first few years of work, women start to lag behind men. Only a few reach the summits.

In the USSR, like any other country, higher posts mean more intensive work, which very often leads to a loss of creativity and to increased professional tension. Furthermore, there is no drastic difference in remuneration for different categories of work. The substantial increase in professional duties and responsibility connected with a leading post is not compensated with an appreciable increase in pay. Apparently these circumstances lessen the women's desire to advance in their careers. According to one painstaking piece of research, two-thirds of the women polled said they did not want a promotion.

### Production or Reproduction?

Sociological research has shown that in the case of a university educated professional (an engineer, for instance), her/his creativity and efficiency most fully manifest themselves after six to ten years of work. During this period, young women usually get married and have children. At a time when men are conquering the summits of their profession, women often leave their jobs to have children. Thus, a woman's desire to get married and have children reduces her career possibilities and prevents her from using, to the fullest, those equal opportunities the Soviet social

system does grant her. If marriage and children are the main goals of a woman's life, the modest results in her profession can be explained by her own free choice.

In Armenia, my home, most families have two or three children, and the mother is traditionally held in great esteem. Some Armenian women see their main calling in motherhood, and do not care much about a career. The government supports this attitude and every year keeps increasing aid to big families. The number of women who devote themselves to their family alone is not, however, large. An increasing number of women do not want to quit their job in favour of family.

There has appeared a certain contradiction in the treatment of women by the state and by some enterprises. The state has a stake in ensuring a growing birthrate (a number of Union Republics' population rates are decreasing, for instance) and in having women work in production. A recently adopted law on enterprises specifically notes enterprises' responsibility to grant women every opportunity to combine their duties at home and at work. Mothers enjoy major social privileges. However, enterprises are more interested in having good production indexes, and, therefore, their directors resent 18-month maternity leaves, paid leaves to care for a sick child, and working women's preoccupation with their family problems. As a result, the more prestigious jobs are given to men.

Enterprises are generally not interested in ensuring equal access to professional development for men and women. Those which do care about the professional advancement of their working women do not get additional economic or social advantages for that. Enterprises which are indifferent to the needs of working women and which do not ensure favourable conditions for them are not penalized in any way. I hope that the collectives of working people and the women's councils set up at all enterprises will soon have their say on this matter.

### Psychological Barriers

Career women must overcome socio-psychological obstacles. Gender-based stereotypes in the Soviet Union favour the supposed male attributes of stamina, energy and drive, over 'feminine' indecision, emotionalism, compliance, etc. Such

stereotypes impede women's opportunities for career advancement.

Women's response to the existence of these stereotypes is of interest. Sociological research has shown that some women adapt themselves to these stereotypes. Other highly professional women devote themselves unstintingly to their duties as competent and skillful managers, without losing their 'femininity.' The most common response to these stereotypes is that women simply do not pursue promotion opportunities.

I could mention many more socio-psychological difficulties faced by career women. The crux of the matter is, however, that in the aggregate, psychological barriers form the basis of a serious discrepancy between the granted and the exercised rights of women in professional activities.

### Women's Choices

Just three years ago we were far from blaming our society for women's limited career opportunities and for their difficulties in combining work in production and in the home. The discussion about equal opportunities for men and women was restricted to the level of democratic division of roles in the family. The press discussed the masculinization of women, and feminization of men, and those men who refused to share family responsibilities with their wives. To cope with their problems women had to curtail social activity, have fewer children, neglect family duties, stay single or divorce their husbands. Under the conditions of fairly liberal divorce laws and easy divorce proceedings in the USSR, women actively exercise this right. Approximately 70 percent of divorce cases are initiated by the woman.

Of course, divorce is not always a good thing, because it does not solve all family problems. Moreover, it sometimes becomes a tragedy for the children. After divorce women face other difficulties: loneliness, the problems of bringing up their children alone. Nevertheless, divorce is a free choice — the realization of one's right to new opportunities and new hopes. Divorce can be seen as a kind of protest by women against existing obstacles to the full realization of their rights.

Unmarried mothers enjoy certain privileges in our country. They receive allow-

ances for their child up to the age of 16. It may even seem that the law encourages the birth of children out of wedlock. But this is not so. The law pertaining to unmarried mothers recognizes the right of any woman to have a baby, and compels the public to be tolerant of the woman and of the child born out of wedlock.

It is impossible to forecast one's entire life. There is the dissimilarity of interests, the bitterness of unfaithfulness, and the pain of parting in life. But let the woman herself choose whether to have a family or not. One of my friends, a mathematician, never met anyone she could really love. So, nearing the age of 30, she made up her mind to have a child out of wedlock. Does she have problems? Of course! But most of these are connected with the future questions of her child: who is my father and where is he?

### Social Activity

Soviet society has been going through a period of fundamental reorganization (*perestroika*). *Perestroika* envisages civic and social activity, discarding of conservative stereotypes, and unlimited competition in any field.

I should like to say a few words about developments in my native Armenia. The second half of our century has been a turning point for the cultural traditions which have been the basis of the Armenian family. Demographic changes came first. As late as the fifties, Armenian women had many children. Their evolution within the subsequent decade was equal to that which women in developed countries had effected in 100 years. By the end of the sixties, Armenian women already had few children. Their needs and social behaviour also changed as they began following new behavioural patterns.

Today Armenian women are in transition again: from traditional values to social innovation. Frankly speaking, I was formerly always inclined to emphasize the "backstage" role of Armenian women in social activities. It seemed to me that the majority of our women could not discard the traditional stereotype of the "classical" Armenian woman, well-educated, involved in professional activities within reasonable limits, but far from active in community work, because all her interests were centred on her family

— husband, children and near relations. In social activity, Armenian women were essentially inferior to men. Much has changed of late.

*Perestroika* has stirred up women and has increased their social activity. Newspapers and magazines mention an avalanche of letters from them. Women touch on the widest range of problems — family, education, work in production, the collectives of working people, science, engineering, administration and politics. Armenian women actively participate in meetings, and marches, and advance social initiatives. With this rising tide of social activity, women's councils have been revived. Their goal is to guarantee the rights of women in all fields, to create favourable opportunities for families and children; in other words, to enhance the role of women and women's organizations in the USSR.

This will hardly solve all the problems facing women. But one thing is self-evident. Women will have more opportunities to play leading roles in social developments and in the future progress of our state and social system.

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"A Literacy Class," etching by Sarra Shor, 1933



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