



In the industrial societies of Europe and the United States, as in the developing countries of the Third World, the relationship between

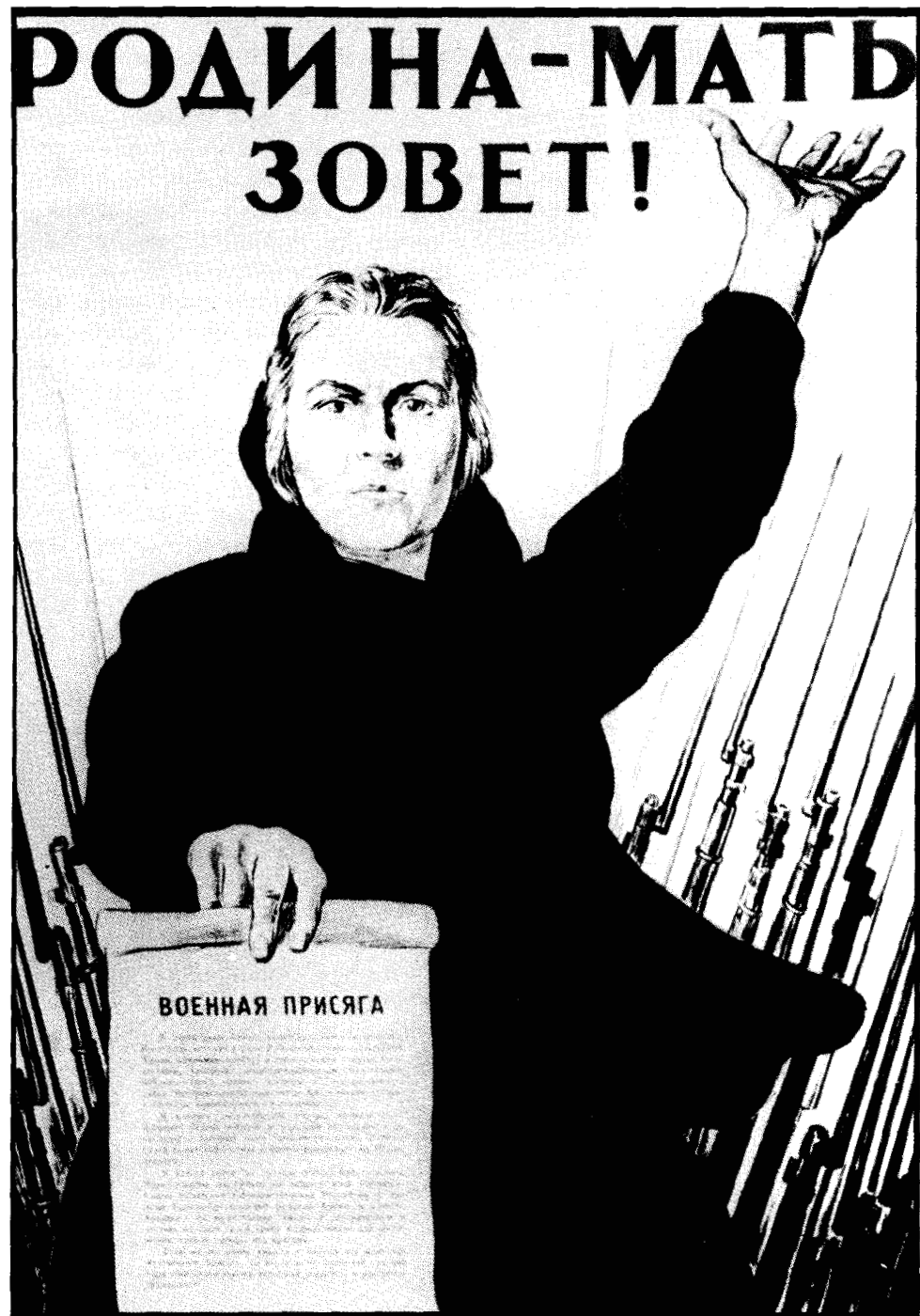
changes in women's economic roles and changes in the structure and functions of the family has attracted growing attention from social scientists and policy makers alike. The scope and patterns of female employment, it is increasingly recognized, critically influence key features of economic and social behaviour and, most important, fertility.

For policy analysts concerned with Third World issues, these linkages present an opportunity rather than a problem: they hold out the prospect that development strategies that enhance the educational and employment opportunities of women will not only increase national income but also may contribute significantly to population control. In Europe and the United States, by contrast, these linkages are a source of concern. Rising levels of female labour force participation have been accompanied by rising divorce rates and declining birthrates, provoking widespread anxiety that the family itself is threatened by current trends. A whole array of economic and social programs are undergoing reevaluation with a view to their impact on family stability and family size, and long-standing debates over what constitutes "equal protection" of workers who are also women have been reignited.

Because of its special relevance to all these concerns, the Soviet experience deserves the close attention of social scientists and policy analysts alike. Extensive reliance on female labour has been a central feature of Soviet economic development for several decades, with important consequences for virtually every aspect of economic and social life. Today, the Soviet Union claims the highest female labour force participation rates of any industrial society with over 85% of women engaged in full-time work or study, and women constituting 51% of all workers and employees. At the same time, rising divorce rates and sharply declining birthrates have made the single-child family the norm in the urban European part of the country, while large families remain widespread in the Moslem regions of Soviet Central Asia. Indeed, important

Interaction of Women's Work and Family Roles in the USSR

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regional and ethnic variations linked to socio-cultural, as well as economic differences, make the Soviet Union a fascinating universe for comparative study.

But the Soviet experience is important above all because the effort to develop policies that simultaneously guarantee women equal treatment as citizens and workers, and special treatment as mothers, has had some distinctive consequences for women's work and family roles. The promise of the new Communist Party Program of 1986 that "favourable conditions will be created that will enable women to combine motherhood with active participation in work and social activities"¹ is a clear admission that this goal has not yet been attained.



Until the late 1960s, Soviet writings interpreted high rates of female employment as unambiguous evidence that socialism and sexual equality went hand in hand, and that Soviet policy had created optimal conditions for the harmonious combination of women's work and family roles. In recent years, however, ritual self-congratulation has given way to serious self-criticism. A growing array of studies by Soviet scholars, as well as numerous Soviet novels and films, document at length the conflicting demands of women's dual roles, the constraints they place on occupational mobility, and their harmful effects on the health of women workers and the well-being of their families.² A succession of scholarly conferences, trade union meetings, and Communist Party gatherings devoted to problems of female labour and *byt* (everyday life) have yielded an abundance of often conflicting diagnoses, recommendations, and goals.³

These discussions and initiatives reveal a growing Soviet recognition that economic objectives pursued without regard to their social consequence not only risk failure but also threaten to exacerbate what are already perceived to be acute social problems. Consequently, significant changes in the training and utilization of female labour depend on, and are likely to elicit further changes in, a broad array of social institutions, especially the family. Family and population policies will in turn directly affect the future size and quality of the Soviet labour force.

Policy Dilemmas and Options

The irreplaceable contribution of women to both production and reproduction presents the Soviet leadership with a classic policy dilemma. Soviet development had induced two mutually contradictory processes. By opening a new range of educational and professional options for women, it has encouraged them to acquire new skills, values, orientations, and aspirations that compete with their traditional domestic roles. At the same time, the high value attached to the family, the critical social roles assigned to it, and the large investments of time and energy needed to sustain it, seriously constrain women's occupational commitments and achievements.

The resulting "contradictions" in the language of Soviet analysts, between the occupational and family roles of working women, have an extremely high economic, demographic, and social cost. They adversely affect women's health and welfare, as well as their opportunities for professional and personal development; they "engender tensions and conflicts in internal family relations, lead to a weakening of control over the conduct of children and a deterioration of their upbringing, and, finally, [they are] one of the basic causes of the declining birthrate."⁴

These tensions may be increased rather than diminished by current economic, demographic, and technological trends. Undeniably, the growing availability of consumer goods and services will lighten some of the heaviest burdens; rising wages have made it increasingly possible for worker families to share in the "consumption revolution" of the past two decades. Other structural changes may prove less favourable to women's professional mobility. To the extent that extraordinary circumstances in the past — a severe deficit of males coinciding with a fundamental transformation of the economic and social structure — created unprecedented opportunities and pressures for female occupational mobility, the return to demographic normality for younger age cohorts in the context of a relative saturation of elite positions, is likely to slow both the impetus and the real opportunities for the advancement of women in the educational and occupational structure, and to increase the competition for valued positions.

The scientific-technological revolution and the shift from manufacturing to services may also adversely affect the structure of female employment. Without major changes in the system of vocational training and placement, women are likely to face growing problems of entry into highly skilled technical employment and to be absorbed in growing numbers into routine white-collar and service occupations, particularly if part-time employment opportunities are expanded. The major economic reforms now being introduced would further accelerate this process. Such jobs may be more compatible with family responsibilities but less commensurate with women's training, ability and aspirations.

Thus, it is with a heightened sense of urgency that the Soviet leadership has begun to confront the complex issues surrounding female labour and its social requisites and consequences. Enlisting the aid of social scientists as well as several newly created legislative and administrative bodies, it has launched a serious and sustained quest for a strategy that will encourage a more effective use of scarce labour resources without further compromising family stability, and that will also reverse the declining birthrate in the developed regions of the USSR.

A first group of proposed measures is aimed at redistributing female labour resources by removing women from employment in unsafe and unhealthy conditions; transferring them from low-skilled, nonmechanized, and heavy labour to more skilled and suitable jobs, and achieving a demographically more balanced regional labour market by providing a better mix of "men's" and "women's" work. A number of critics have also urged that upgrading the skills of women workers be given higher priority and increased incentives, and that, following the example of the G.D.R., vocational programs be adapted to the schedules and responsibilities of working mothers.⁵

A second group of proposals would improve the working conditions of the female labour force. Despite the elaborate provisions of protective labour legislation, complaints abound that existing regulations are inadequate and their requirements widely violated. The employment of women in hazardous and unhealthy conditions that are "harmful to the female organism" remains a problem of consid-

erable magnitude. Moreover, although a number of critics have called for a thorough revision of the list of occupations forbidden to women, they have also noted that hazardous conditions are widespread even in industries — such as textiles — that are considered especially suited to women. Some experts have urged that existing protective legislation be tightened, and that an effort be made to reduce night work, overtime, and inconvenient work shifts for women.



Some analysts have even advocated reducing the “intensity” of female labour by introducing differentiated work norms. Insisting that women’s contributions to the domestic economy and to childbearing constitute socially useful labour not paid for by society, these writers have urged that women be assigned reduced work norms, and even a shortened working day, without loss of pay.⁶ By refusing to exclude women’s domestic responsibilities from the definition of “work,” and by arguing that working mothers have the right to be compensated for the double shift they perform, the advocates of such measures are not only insisting that socially useful labour be properly rewarded, they are also putting the blame for current shortcomings on the shoulders of policy-makers. Needless to say, such proposals have not been widely endorsed.

A third group of recommendations would increase the supply of consumer and everyday services to reduce the strain of women’s dual roles. The economic and social costs of inadequate services and child-care facilities have received particular attention in recent years. A growing number of studies argue that investments in refrigerators, public laundries, or rapid transit would generate savings of time that would more than compensate for initial investments. Calls for the more rapid expansion of preschool facilities are coupled with reminders that the lack of such facilities contributes to underemployment of women, high rates of turnover, and lowered productivity. Moreover, the slow pace of progress in “revolutionizing everyday life” has encouraged a number of writers to press for greater reliance on private and cooperative arrangements. They call for parent nurser-

ies in housing developments, economic unions of families to share the burdens of shopping and repairs, and even the creation of bureaus to provide nannies and governesses for childcare.

Taken together, these three groups of recommendations amount to an agenda for slow but incremental reform to reduce the conflict between female work and family roles, but not to eradicate the distinction between “men’s” and “women’s” work. They rest on the assumption that a combination of technological progress and socioeconomic reform, sponsored by a benevolent Party leadership, will serve as a sufficient solvent of sexual inequality and will obviate the need for more far-reaching changes in the structure of family or work. It is conceivable that the present balance of the two can be maintained indefinitely, but many Soviet experts believe that the problem will, in fact, require a more controversial set of choices.

One option with vocal advocates is an all-out effort to elevate the social status and material rewards associated with reproduction, even if this results in a decline in female labour-force participation. Alarmed by the current birthrate, a number of prominent Soviet scholars have urged that a comprehensive population policy receive highest priority “regardless of any considerations that may be advanced from an economic, ecological, sociological, or any other point of view.”⁷ They call for measures to enhance fertility potential, to alter social values in favour of larger families, and to modify the pension system to reward child rearing as well as production.

The central and most controversial aspect of this pronatalist position is its desire to transform maternity into professional, paid, social labour. Financial subsidies, tailored not to the direct costs of children but to the opportunity cost of female labour, would be offered to induce new mothers to withdraw from the labour force for periods of up to three years; a sliding scale of benefits tied to wage levels would ensure a more equal distribution of births among different social strata. The costs of such a program, its advocates argue, would be offset by its long-term contributions to the labour supply and by the more immediate savings generated by a cutback in public nurseries. Viewing high maternal employment as a temporarily necessary evil, they argue that, at the

present stage of its economic development, Soviet society can afford, and would greatly benefit from, a shift toward family upbringing of young children.

Measures such as these could widen the options of many women, but they have potentially far-reaching economic and social costs. To have the desired demographic effect, they would entail relatively long interruptions in female labour force participation, which could result in a deterioration or obsolescence of skills and could pose substantial problems of retraining and re-entry. Moreover, the lower return on investments in women’s education might adversely affect their educational opportunities and increase the reluctance of employers to hire or train them for skilled and responsible positions. By assigning primacy to female family and reproductive functions while reducing the scope and centrality of female employment, by increasing the permeability of female work roles to family responsibilities, and by forestalling a more equal division of family responsibilities, this entire approach, in the view of its critics, represents an unacceptable step backward. It would re-create a division of labour based on sex.

A radically different set of policy options derives from the premise that the more effective use of female labour, not stimulation of fertility, is the overriding priority. Arguing that work is of critical importance to women’s social status and personal development as well as to the economy, and that economic progress and national power depend on the *quality* of the labour force rather than its size, proponents urge the further expansion of women’s economic role in terms of greater equality with men — along with a reduction in the household burdens that inhibit it.

“Women have no need of ‘light work’ but of qualified work, commensurate with their professional preparation and training, their education, and their talents,”⁸ insisted one commentator. Not “protection” but assignment to positions of responsibility should receive priority. Recognizing that women’s “double burden” reduces their ability to raise their skill levels, to master more complex jobs, and to undertake more responsible duties, this approach calls for a more equal sharing of family responsibilities. As one prominent sociologist put it:

*The entry of women into the sphere of social production presupposes the return of men to the family. If women had remained within the family, in order to produce the same quantity of material wealth it would have been necessary for men to work almost twice as much. From this point of view it is possible to say that women liberated men from half of their heavy work. Why, then, should some men not wish, in their turn, to take upon themselves half of "light" women's work?*⁹



But even the most outspoken of Soviet feminists emphasize the biological and psychological differences between men and women, and attach high value to women's family and maternal roles. Unlike some of their Western counterparts, they do not embrace the notion of transcending gender in the allocation of social roles.

Emphasizing that new attitudes are a precondition for new patterns of behaviour, and refusing to treat them as a purely private and personal matter, a number of writers call for a more systematic intervention by state, Party, and public organizations to inculcate egalitarian values. The post-revolutionary Women's Department (*Zhenotdel*) is recalled and held up as a model by one labour economist, who explicitly regrets its premature abolition:

*The resolution of this problem can occur only as a result of a complex of political, economic, and organizational measures.... Unfortunately, the whole system of institutions created in the process of socialist construction for the resolution of the complex problem of women's work and everyday life... was liquidated before it had completely fulfilled its special tasks.*¹⁰

The more immediate problems faced by working mothers with young children would be alleviated by an expansion of part-time work rather than by extended maternity leaves.¹¹ By making it possible for more women to enter the labour force, and by enabling mothers to maintain some continuity of employment without sacrificing the time available for child rearing and family chores, part-time employment would meet the needs of many women

workers without incurring the extremely high costs of the more radical pronatalist program.

Clearly, the introduction of part-time work on a large scale would raise a host of unresolved problems.¹² It is far more feasible in routine white-collar and service occupations than in highly skilled technical positions or supervisory jobs. In industry, it would require the creation of special sectors and assembly lines that would segregate part-time workers from the full-time labour force. In all likelihood, it would increase the concentration of women in low-skilled and poorly remunerated jobs. In addition, if recent experiments with shortened workdays are any indication, it is also likely to forestall a more equal division of household responsibilities. Recent small-scale experiments with flextime are, therefore, especially promising precisely because of its potential for avoiding an intensification of the sexual division of labour.

¹*Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, Moscow: Novosti, 1986.

²N.V. Dogle, *Usloviisa zhizni i zdorov'e tekstil' shchits*. Moscow: Meditsina, 1977; E.B. Gruzdeva & E.S. Chertikhina, *Trud i byt sovetskikh zhenshchin*. Moscow: Politizdat, 1983; Z.M. Iuk, *Trud zhenshchiny i sem'ia*. Minsk: Belarus', 1975; A.G. Kharchev, ed., *Izmenenie polozheniia zhenshchiny i sem'ia*. Moscow: Nauka, 1977; A.E. Kotliar & S.I. Turchaninova, *Zaniatost' zhenshchin v proizvodstve*. Moscow: Statistika, 1975; V.B. Mikhailiuk, *Ispol' zovanie zhenskogo truda v narodnom khoziaistve*. Moscow: Ekonomika, 1970; E.E. Novikova, *Zhenshchina v razvitom sotsialisticheskom obshchestve*. Moscow: Mysl', 1985; N.A. Sakharova, *Optimal'nye vozmozhnosti ispol'zovaniia zhenskogo truda v sfere obshchestvennogo proizvodstva*. Kiev: Vishcha shkola, 1973; N.M. Shishkan, *Trud zhenshchin v usloviakh razvitogo sotsializma*. Kishinev: Shtiinstsa, 1976.

³M. Buckley, (ed). *Soviet Social Scientists Talking: An Official Debate About Women*. London: Macmillan, 1986; A.G. Kharchev & S.I. Golod, *Professional'naia rabota zhenshchin i sem'ia*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1971; "Povyshat' politicheskuiu proizvodstvennuiu aktivnost' zhenshchin: s plenuma ivanskogo obkoma KPSS," *Partiinaiia Zhizn'*, 16 (1975): 39-45; N. Solov'ev, I. Lazauskas, & Z.A. Iankova,

(eds). *Problemy byta, braka i sem'ia*. Vil'nius: Mintis, 1970.

⁴A.G. Kharchev, "Byt i sem'ia" in N. Solov'ev, I. Lazauskas & Z.A. Iankova, eds., *Problemy byta, braka i sem'ia*. Vil'nius: Mintis (1970): 19; Shishkan, 1976, p. 38.

⁵V.G. Kostakov, *Trudovye resursy piatiletki*. Moscow: Politizdat (1976): 101-160; A.E. Kotliar & A. Shlemin, "Problemy ratsional'noi zaniatosti zhenshchin." *Sotsialisticheskii trud*, 7 (1974): 110-119; G.P. Sergeeva, "O professional'noi strukture rabotaiushchikh zhenshchin," *Planovoe khoziaistvo*, (1976): 37-46.

⁶Z.A. Iankova, "Razvitie lichnosti zhenshchiny v sovetskom obshchestve," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 4 (1975): 44-46; Iuk, 1975, p. 122; Sakharova, 1973.

⁷Uralis, 1974, p. 283.

⁸S. Berezovskaia, "Prestizh — zabota nasha obshchaia," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 12 (1975): 12.

⁹N.G. Iurkevich, *Sovetskaia sem'ia: funktsii i usloviia stabil'nosti*. Minsk: Belorusskii gosudarstvennii universitet, 1970, p. 192.

¹⁰Sonin, 1973, pp. 378-379.

¹¹E.R. Martirosian, "Pravovoe regulirovanie nepolnogo rabocheho vremeni," *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo*, 10 (1976): 54-61; A. Novitskii & M. Babkina, "Nepolnoe rabochee vremia i zaniatost' naseleniia," *Voprosy ekonomiki*, 7 (1973): 133-140; N.M. Shishkan, "Nepolnye rabochii den' dlia zhenshchin v usloviakh sotsializma," *Nauchnye doklady vysshei shkoly: Ekonomicheskie nauki*, 8 (1971): 42-47.

¹²J. Moses, *The Politics of Women and Work in the Soviet Union and the United States*. Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, 1983.

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