



Zoya Boguslavskaya on Soviet Women

NOVOSTI PRESS AGENCY

Zoya Boguslavskaya is a distinguished Soviet writer, playwright and critic. Since the article "What Kind of a Woman is the Modern Woman?" was published in the popular Soviet weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (circulation 3.8 million) in August 1987, the editors have received many letters. Zoya Boguslavskaya touched upon problems encountered by Soviet women, but little covered in the mass media.

Why did Boguslavskaya write such an acute article appealing to men and women alike?

I got angry because whatever our newspapers write about women is sweet syrup. Doesn't our public notice what a heavy burden women are shouldering. And I'm no exception, though all is



well in my family [She is married to the poet Andrei Voznesensky, and they have two children, a son and daughter]. After work I have to go shopping, cook, wash and do other hard and dull work about the house. When asked what I would like to have in this life, I answer—help in household drudgery. The rest I can do myself.

Zoya has visited the United States, where her work has evoked keen interest.¹

Now I see the difference in the situation in Soviet and American women. We're moving in quite different directions. Soviet women are much freer than American women politically and psychologically. No American woman can talk as freely to a man as a Soviet woman can, even if he is her boss. This is a result of her

education in a condition of social equality. We are equal with men in work and are fully independent.

The American standard of life is higher than ours and American women have much more free time. But professionally they come against the obstacles thrown up by men. I want you to see my point. I'm no fanatical feminist. I have a great regard for men and do not want our society to break up into two opposite groups. I was surprised to see how many areas are closed to women in the United States. I'm happy that the women's movement is successfully developing in the United States. Only recently did American women get the right to many professions earlier closed to them. Our women have no such problem.

¹The Soviet Progress Publishers and the American Double Day Publishers have invited Boguslavskaya and Francine Duplessi Grey, an American author, to write a book on women's life in the Soviet Union and America.

With her consent, an abridged version of Boguslavskaya's article "What Kind of a Woman is the Modern Woman?" is reprinted here. The article was made available to us through Novosti Press Agency.

What Kind of Woman is the Modern Woman

BY ZOYA BOGUSLAVSKAYA

And, really, what kind? What will they think of us a century hence? What kind of picture will they get from the writers' and filmmakers' productions, and from the news media of the latter half of the 20th century? Frankly, literature and the arts have generally tended to present a much narrower view of the modern women.

To begin with, let us discard the stereotyped way of thinking. Let's see where an average representative of the "better sex" has made her way to — aside from district presidium committees, peace forums, fashion centres and the services. Let's, for a time, forget reports made on International Women's Day¹ which rightly

point out women's achievements in the Patriotic War² or in the sphere of production, which note the recently recorded figures of women's success in many different spheres. True enough, it was a Soviet who was the first woman to make a space flight. But let us take a closer view of the "crowd."

We will see that the celebrated "nurturer of the human race" has taken from men a great many "privileges" she apparently never needed before. She wears trousers, smokes and even uses swear words at times. Wasn't it only yesterday that society had to defend a woman left without alimony by her run-away hus-

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band? Yet today, we hear loud voices from men asking for protection from women's aggressiveness. There are quite a few young women who prefer not to get married at all so as not to serve a man and his needs. Such women look at their "beloveds" only as partners for the continuation of the human race. Or simply as partners.

Such diversity in women's ways of thinking and behaviour is reflected only partially by the arts. A stream of films made in the last few decades by women filmmakers such as Larisa Shepitko, Tatiana Lioznova, Lana Gogoberidze, Dinara Asanova and Kira Muratova, and a group of plays written by Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Svetlana Aleksievich and others, though powerful, have just barely made visible some destructive processes

in women's life — processes which call, in fact, for profound sociological and scientific studies.

A character in one of the films says to a woman correspondent: "I haven't lost my mind yet — to think of cleaning up his garbage and washing his clothes. This way I'm free to do as I like, I've got a child and I'm happy. Marry him? Why should I put my neck in a noose?" Where has this philosophy come from?

The news media have defined the new trend more clearly than the arts: from the attained equality in society, woman is now striving for equality within the family. Having solved one problem, we have changed but little in the attitude of potential spouses. The fact is that family life, as we know it, opposes this kind of equality. Is there at least a small chance to remedy the situation without breaking the former harmony of the family, habitually associated with man being the head?

Newspapers and magazines loudly protest today against women's overloads. The statistics give the following figures: in a week a man has, at minimum, ten hours more for rest, leisure, reading, etc. than a woman. But what happens to these hours, one is inclined to ask ironically? The same stubborn figures say that our modern women are better educated and more advanced in cultural fields than men. How do they manage to achieve this? At what cost? No one has bothered to count the losses we women suffer for the right to act as men.

The price in stress, from a variety of causes, is great. Some psychologists see the cause of women's most complicated stresses in the lack of communication. According to them, women's weakest point is the inability to talk with anyone. Not simply to chat casually with their colleagues at work, in a long queue or in transit — but to talk meaningfully about themselves, about their own personal affairs: what upsets her, what has offended her, what has been tormenting her the whole day, or how she feels when her nerves are giving way. Or, paradoxically, what is more rare still: to talk about her success, her luck, her achievement acknowledged by everyone around. The lack of opportunities for self-expression, the psychologists think, deforms, maims a

woman's inner world more than anything else. At what expense does she cede to man this right to reveal herself; what price does society pay for feelings pent up, for the sake of seeming interesting and important, or gaining approval? This is an even more serious topic for socio-psychological studies. And how many other paradoxical secrets, social mysteries and tragedies of the contemporary woman remain outside the field of vision of scholars, sociologists and writers?

What do we know about women? About their way of thinking, behaviour, pain, and even their state of health? Is it not too often that men misinterpret women's readiness to shoulder new responsibilities? False optimism in depicting our women at home and at work, in predicting their bright future, has gradually formed a population of art consumers accustomed to this kind of stereotype: a hospitable hostess, a mother of several children, an excellent wife who can do everything, who always looks rested, attractively dressed and smiling. This portion of the public does not wish to know the truth.

The inability to share another's pain — to put oneself in the place of a person with a different kind of life or a different psychology — is building an impenetrable wall of misunderstanding. This inability obscures the meaning of a book, or of what is shown on the screen or on the stage. But it is only half the trouble. The other half is "I do not want to know." The safe psychology of choosing to detach one's good fortune from the others — the profound indifference to which we have grown so accustomed that we even teach our children: for God's sake! Don't interfere when you see someone being beaten, don't meddle, go your own way, it's none of your business!

And so we see a rough type of woman becoming more and more common in our life. A frenzied female. Merciless. She thinks she has paid a high price for her right to get ahead not heeding anyone or anything; she is used to returning abuse in kind whether buying vegetables, sitting in her office as a shop superintendent at a weaving factory, waiting to use the pay phone or travelling in a subway. For her to address someone politely means to degrade herself.

The director of a self-managed fashion house, feeling proud of her firm's unconventional merchandise and its reputation for polite treatment of the clientele, complains to me, nevertheless: "But, you see, I've got difficulties with hiring personnel." "But why? Are their wages lower than anywhere else?" "On the contrary! They get fifty or even one hundred percent more!" "What's the matter, then?"

The director utters flatly:

"They have trouble in dealing with the customers. They must help them try on a dress. Several dresses at times. And say 'thank you' for the purchase."

"What's wrong with that?," I wondered.

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"Well, they say rather than bow to every one and say "thanks" and "come again," they'd much rather get smaller wages and work somewhere else. I simply can't see the reason..." says the director with a sigh.

What is the explanation for our not knowing women? And why, on seeing an unexpected flaw in their behaviour, do we shrug our shoulders and blame them?

There are many reasons. The first is the Russian tradition of privacy, whereby any information about the woman, the family, the relations between the sexes used to be looked upon as "washing one's dirty linen in public." The second is the resulting absence of any truthful statistics on women. The third: the habitual grin whenever the "woman problem" is mentioned; "ah, all those feminists," — with these words any serious man would instantly

dismiss the problem.

And we women would support him ourselves. How great is our wish to seem to be in that liberated space where the mechanism of full equality between women and men in all spheres has supposedly been operating without a hitch for a long time! This is why many of our illusions, frozen into propagandist stereotypes, prevent us from looking reality in the face.

This is why, in thinking of women's heavy work load, one rather puzzling question comes to the fore: could it be that our women have too many of the wrong rights? Can't we do without some of them today? Is it not time to exchange some of these rights for others? An analysis of the covert causes of the troubles our woman encounters in many aspects of her life is needed, not only to make her a full-fledged member of *perestroika*; but to give her some incentives for acting and thinking in a new way. Is there also a need to regenerate that type of harmonious woman of which men and literary critics dream so ardently? How irritated they are with these maladjusted, eternally worried, grossly overloaded and industrious workers who, not only their husbands, but even their own children, rarely stop to think of as people!

But is there any escaping from the destructive pattern of the 20th century pace, from the onset of the super-civilization, from the need to sacrifice all to the idol of the automated society? No, there isn't! That's what makes it essential to change something in the most basic attitude to woman — to realize that her deformation is society's deformation, and that nothing appears in our life of itself, just automatically.

A short time ago the American writer, Alvin Toffler, noted with sadness that when his wife had attended school she was the only one in the class whose parents were not living together. But today their daughter is the only one in the class whose parents *are* living together.

But what if we give up the prognostication of the social consequences of civilization?

Let's reflect on our actual opportunities. Is there really any reason for women to go into the fields occupied by men from

time immemorial?

I think the main problem now is not so much that female labour is unprofitable in a number of 'masculine' occupations, but that a qualitative redistribution of the share of woman's contribution to the Soviet society is necessary. It is a national disgrace to see women shovelling asphalt on the road with a spade and a man sitting and operating a steamroller to level this asphalt!

The war ended almost half a century ago and it is utterly pointless to have to prove that a woman can operate an excavator. Even women's work as air hostesses on long flights has turned out to be a tricky business. It has been found after the age of 35, air hostesses have to leave their work because of kidney troubles, unless they have been clever enough to drink water regularly during their flights. But this has come to our attention only recently, as have other things, such as children's mortality due to their mothers' neglect, girls' smoking, and women taking to drink early in life. Surveys indicate that girls start smoking in our country at the age of nine or ten, and that among senior-grade girls 60 percent are smokers. And what about the great number of defective babies born of smoking mothers? Doctors think that the main causes for all this are social: the nature of women's work, stressful family relations, excessive work loads.

I think that the redistribution of vocations and trades goes both ways: woman is dragged into hard man's labour, but she is excluded from some of the fields where she used to excel, while many men are going, at the same time, into the typically 'feminine' occupations: they are dress-makers, hairdressers, skin specialists and waiters.

Let's think of such a field as international journalism or diplomacy. Where are they now, the Kollontais or Reissners³ of today. For some reasons we do not observe attractive women's faces at international press conferences that are so often shown on TV now, not even among the correspondents asking questions. As a rule, our women writers are absent from the international arena: their voices are not heard at congresses, forums, symposiums, "round table" meetings devoted to

creative artistic problems. How then, can the world learn about our women's way of thinking, their way of life and cultural endeavours? And what if the strong points of woman's nature — her psyche, physiology and way of thinking — are analysed scientifically?

It was only yesterday that many fields, particularly women's lives, were a closed topic. Yet the facts show that society can be studied well only if all its components are well known.

And what if we simply raise woman's prestige? What if we trust her, encourage her, draw her into discussion of important

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problems of the highest value and significance? Why the stinginess in showing all those "thank-you's" from meeting rostrums, in local trade-union committees, in the street? And why not only for her breaking a work record, but also for her organizing assistance to children left by their parents? Why not offer women special conditions for resting during work breaks, in the evening, during their annual holiday? Why not find the means to help them overcome their notorious communication deficiency, perhaps in a club, dance hall, or a cafe? I'd like to formulate this proposal clearly: to shorten a women's working hours as soon as she has a family, counting at least a part of her home chores as working hours.

A new and a very important institution has come into being recently: women's

councils. What sort of organizations are they going to be? What rights do they enjoy? What questions will they address? After all, they are only in the making and we shall not save them from being mere formalities unless we discuss publicly, on a wide scale in the press, both their merits and difficulties. A small nucleus — a council of women writers on international relations — has emerged within the USSR Writers' Union. It would be good if international women's creative organizations — such as publishing houses, magazines and institutes — could make more profound studies of the actual phenomenon of the Soviet woman, and endeavour to learn more about her way of life and thinking.

Society suffers great losses by dismissing "the woman problem." Whether we grant the woman additional free hours or not, she still does half of her home chores at the expense of working hours: running from store to store, taking washing to the laundry, and interrupting her work several times a day to give instructions to her children over the phone.

Classical Russian literature depicted the image of a hesitant, philosophizing man incapable of following a woman in her strong feelings and aspirations. The Oblomovs, Lavretskies or Onegin are extremely rare now. Man is a dictator today. I call to you men: show your will, your striving to fathom the truth, to ponder seriously the question: what kind of women are we women?

¹March 8, International Women's Day, is observed in the Soviet Union every year as a nation-wide holiday.

²World War II, 1941-1945.

³Aleksandra M. Kollontai (1872-1952) — a prominent state and political figure, comrade-in-arms of Lenin. Active in the Soviet diplomatic service from 1930-1945. Larisa Reissner (1895-1926) — a Russian Soviet author. Was engaged in political work in the Red Army during of the Civil War in Russia (1918-1920).