

Women in Russia

The More Things Change The More They

by *Beth Richardson*

Des normes de santé à la baisse et l'augmentation de la violence ont un impact négatif sur la participation politique positive des femmes dans une

The Encyclopedia for Girls boasts chapters titles such as A Dictionary of Household Things, Cooking on Your Own, How to Dress Yourself Beautifully, and How to Become an Interesting Person.

Russie en transformation. D'après l'auteure, l'influence politique des femmes est négligeable et risque de le rester encore longtemps.

While the marketization and democratization of Russia have been difficult for society as a whole, these processes have been particularly hard on women. In the past three years, Russia has seen an increased polarization of gender roles—particularly among the young—higher unemployment rates for women, accompanied by lower rates of rehiring, a decrease in state protection for the unemployed, mothers and single parents, increased violence toward women and their continued *de facto* exclusion from political power. As has been pointed out, “the formulation of effective policies for equal opportunities between women and men will be difficult to produce without a change in the traditional system of gender roles” (Voronina and Klimentova 10).

Societal conditioning frames the window of opportunity for women and young girls alike. “Traditional” roles are instilled in young girls, while entrepreneurial and management skills are generally not taught. A book published in 1993, entitled *The Encyclopedia for Girls* teaches young women about their future roles and

boasts chapters titles such as *A Dictionary of Household Things*, *Cooking on Your Own*, *How to Dress Yourself Beautifully*, *Lessons from Mom* (on sewing) and even, *How to Become an Interesting Person*. Information and advice on education or careers are absent. Girls in Russia are still taught that to be “feminine” means to cook well and take good care of one’s family; to have “masculine” interests, like business or politics, is not encouraged.

The “cult” of marriage and motherhood also remains strong. Russian women generally marry at a younger age and give birth earlier than their Western European and North American counterparts. The stigma attached to being a single woman prevails. Moreover, Russian society as a whole still generally supports traditional family roles—namely, a woman should have paid employment outside the home as well as fulfill the vast majority of domestic duties. This “double shift” means that women have less time and energy to pursue other interests, be they political, economic, or social. There also seems to be subtle state support for women returning to the home. Gorbachev’s famous declaration about his desire to return women to their “purely womanly duties” (Posadskaya 168) was followed by Gennady Melikyan, the Russian Labour Minister, stating in winter 1993 that women should defer to men in the marketplace and return to more “acceptable” roles in the domestic sphere.

Perhaps as a backlash to the publicly puritanical communist society, there has also been an alarming growth in the public objectification of women, not only in the pornography available on every street corner in

Moscow, but also in the influx of sexist western advertising and television. Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the rightist Liberal-Democratic Party, claimed at his August 6th party rally in Moscow that “imperialist” pornography has invaded Russia a tragedy, he said, because pornography is anathema to Russian society. But Zhirinovsky seems to miss the point: there is an enormous demand, at least in urban Russia, for pornography. Further, this industry is neither exclusively geared toward nor run by men. Many women in Moscow sell pornography, and one Russian weekly, *Zhenskoe Delo* (Women’s Affairs) caters to both men and women. A semi-clad woman usually graces the front page, while inside there are articles for women on employment and business along with articles about how to make yourself attractive to others. The objectification of women in contemporary Russian society, by men and women alike leads women to accept objectification as a part of their female identity. Consequently, women in Russia today are still forced to act within a very narrow range of acceptable options (Issraelyan 4).

Conversely, women in Russia are generally more highly literate and highly educated than men. Because they are taught to compromise and adapt, many Russians studying women believe that women will more easily and successfully adapt to the market. Marina Kiena chairs the Association of Single (unwed) Mothers, a Moscow group committed to promoting and protecting the interests and rights of single mothers, particularly during the difficult transition periods. She believes that economic concerns mean that many Russian citizens pay less attention to formerly deviant behavior (like women in business).

The emerging market economy has undoubtedly worsened women’s

Stay the Same

working lives. Unemployment is emerging as a problem for Russian women, but underemployment, the concentration of women in low-status and low-paying positions, and the ever increasing pay gap between men and women, are concerns more relevant to women's daily lives today. Even though Article 19 of the 1991 Russian Constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, labour legislation provides few strategies or mechanisms to ensure equal opportunity. Similarly, equal pay for equal work is mentioned in the Russian Labour Code without mentioning mechanisms for its realization. Thus, many of women's work concerns operate in a real vacuum of useful, applicable legislation.

Official unemployment in Russia in 1994 stood at about one per cent, although it should be kept in mind that these are official statistics and do not include those who have given up looking for work, including women who have become full time homemakers. Of this number, about 70 per cent are women (Russian Academy of Sciences). They are usually the first to be laid off and the last rehired, because they usually hold subordinate positions, and/or employers do not want to provide benefits like maternity leave or flex-time. Unemployment is a particular problem for women during the conversion of the military-industrial complex; they comprise over 50 per cent of all military workers. Sixty to 80 per cent of all women working in the military industry have higher education but are trained in professions not easily adapted to market conditions. Consequently, women military engineers are the single largest group among the unemployed, comprising 60 per cent of all unemployed in Russia.

Many more women are underemployed. They work part-time or are job sharing, and/or work below their

qualifications. These women's potential contribution to the workforce is underutilized and also serves to keep them out of managerial and highly paid positions. As in Canada, women are concentrated in lower-paying, low status jobs. They also perform many heavy labour jobs and outnumber men in night shift work. Women comprise 49.9 per cent of all heavy labourers in light industry. "However, even when women comprise fewer than one half of workers in industry, they are still concentrated in the level of production with heavy physical labour" (Mezentseva 29). In the service sector, women are concentrated in the so-called "pink collar ghetto." They outnumber men in administration, banking, education, and social health and protection, but they are rarely in charge. A 1993 study done by Conversion and Women, a women's group created to help female military workers adapt to the market, discovered that "99 per cent of [female] respondents consider that a woman can't take a high position even at the enterprise where she works" (Conversion and Women 2). Underemployment and dead end jobs waste women's potential to become a

increased to as little as 40 cents to every man's dollar. Like equal opportunity legislation, equal pay legislation has no mechanisms to implement or even enforce the law. At the same time, women are more willing to work for clearly unequal wages just so that they have a wage at all. This enormous pay gap also has the dangerous effect of shuttling women back into the home: with fewer daycares, it makes more economic sense for a mother to stay at home while the father works at paid employment.

Over the past three years, the situation has become critical. Employment ads often seek "nice looking girls." In a bizarre twist of logic, sexual harassment in the workplace, which is not mentioned, let alone prohibited, in Russian legislation, can conform to market economics: those female workers who are "willing to give the most to their employers and the firm," those who are the "friendliest" are the ones who should get ahead. Without some state regulation, discrimination in the workplace is likely to continue.

The state has also passed off many of its previous responsibilities like maternity benefits, daycare, and sick

When Stalin proclaimed women's emancipation achieved in 1936, women made 70 cents to every man's dollar. Over the past three years, this gap has increased to 40 cents to every man's dollar.

positive force in the transformation of Russia.

In light of women's low status at work, it is not surprising that the wage gap between men and women is increasing. When Stalin officially proclaimed women's emancipation achieved in 1936, women still made 70 cents to every man's dollar. Over the past three years, this wage gap has

leave onto individual employers. In turn, employers are often unable or unwilling to provide such benefits and are never forced to do so. Because there is not real equality of opportunity in the workplace, women of childbearing age can and are being turned away, just because they might have children and become a problem for the employer. As a result, women

accept jobs they don't like or are far below their qualifications.

But there are also signs of hope. Irina Razumnova, the director of *Gildea*, a small business consulting centre in Moscow, sees encouraging signs. Many women are willing to start small businesses; 77 per cent of people who have taken courses through *Gildea* have been women. Razumnova also sees a change in so-

nearly impossible in Russia. Divorced fathers have to pay child support. Fathers who have never been married, however, do not, unless paternity is proven. This can only be done through genetic testing, but involuntary genetic testing violates a man's civil rights in Russia, and he cannot be compelled by any court. Like in Canada, child support payments are enforced only rarely and with great difficulty, and state subsidies to single parent families are negligible. All this places an enormous burden on women and inhibits their ability to demand that the state consider their needs.

Russian women's health, particularly their reproductive health, demands special attention. In 1992 and 1993, birth rates in Russia dropped by 22 per cent; there were 9.4 births per 1000 people at the beginning of this year (*Business World Weekly*). This negative population growth has serious consequences for the future of Russian society, including future labour shortages, an unequal age distribution among the population (many senior citizens), a consequent overburdening of state funds for the elderly, and increased health care costs. There are many reasons for this drop in the birth rate, including strong economic pressures. But Inga Grebicheva, director of the Russian Association of Family Planning (RAFP) believes that the condition of women's health definitely plays a major role in the population decline (Grebicheva).

Health care has not fared well under the Russian Federation. Many of the services that worked badly under communism have now stopped working at all. Maternity wards, primitive under communism, have worsened. Better health care is available to those who can afford hard currency medical care or bribes, but most Russian women do not have recourse to this option. Regular maternity wards lack

medicines, sterilized instruments, and even clean linens. Infant mortality from infections and other cause jumped 12 per cent in 1992 and 1993, to 200 out of every 1000 babies (*Business World Weekly*). These conditions are clearly a disincentive to women of childbearing age.

Contraceptives are regarded as solely a woman's concern in Russia. They are difficult to find, and while the country does produce some contraceptives, mostly condoms of questionable reliability, demand still far exceeds supply. The RAFP estimates that contraceptives in Russia satisfy a mere five per cent of demand. Imported from Europe, birth control pills (used by three per cent of fertile Russian women) and barrier contraceptives (19.3 per cent of women) are available in urban areas, but are prohibitively expensive, particularly for young women. Moreover, women have been conditioned to see abortion as the only available option and are suspicious of "hormonal" contraceptives. The Russian Federation does not buy contraceptives for its population, nor does it subsidize contraceptive imports.

As a result, "the number of abortions in Russia in the last few years is not decreasing, and the risk of contracting venereal diseases and AIDS is growing" (Grykin 24). Both of these factors contribute to the population decline. Russian women unknowingly get sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), then may be unwilling or unable to get treatment. Similarly, some Russian women, especially those who do not trust contraceptives, will have successive abortions. Obviously, untreated STDs and successive abortions negatively affect a woman's reproductive abilities. They may be unable to conceive, or conceive only with difficulty.

Abortion remains the most widespread form of birth control in Russia. There are slightly more than two abortions for every live birth; there were 3.6 million registered abortions in 1991 (Kylakov 3). These statistics, however, underestimate the number, as many women have cheaper back-

Domestic violence is considered a foreign concept in Russia, presumably because there is the attitude that some violence in the home is not extraordinary.

ciety. Whereas two years ago the women selling goods on the street would be yelled at or ridiculed, now they are accepted as "normal" and their actions "permissible." Even if "the situation of women in employment is changing extremely slowly and is far from good," (Mezentseva 24) change is coming about.

Notwithstanding, the Russian government is doing little to offset the unequal impact of economic restructuring. The state does provide unemployment benefits to citizens for up to 12 months and does have retraining programs, but fails to address the fact that women make up 70 per cent of all long-term (one year or more) unemployed, and the state does not run any programs aimed specifically at women.

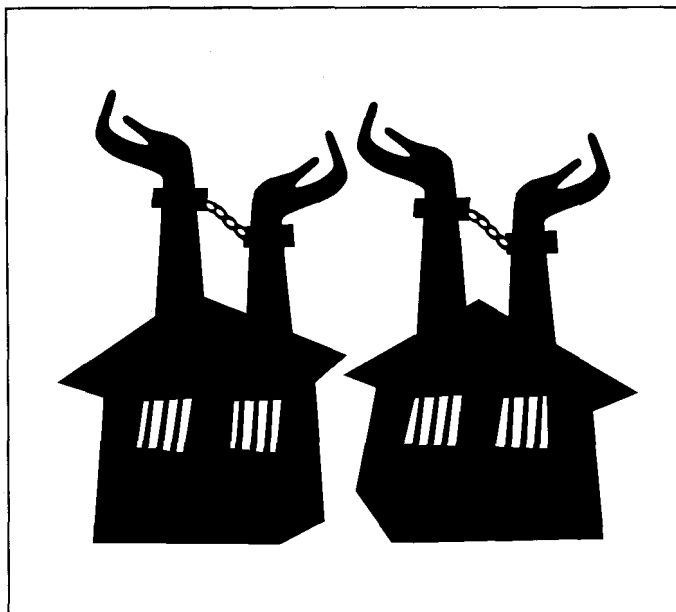
As a result of the employment inequities that women face, along with the state's inability to resolve them, poverty in Russia is becoming increasingly feminized. Eleven percent of families in Russia are headed by a single mother (Kiena). In 1993, more than 17 per cent of all children born were born to unwed mothers (Feoktistova 13). Divorce per 1000 inhabitants has tripled since 1960 (Feoktistova 13). All this means is that many more women have to run a household on one salary; difficult in Canada,

street abortions. Female mortality from abortions stands at an amazing 25 per cent and is not falling (Kylakov 4). Abortions are provided by the state to women over 15 up to the twelfth week of pregnancy, up to 22 weeks with a doctor's permission, and up until birth in extenuating circumstances. This service used to be free under the Soviet regime, but the Russian government now charges patients. This poses a financial problem for women, while emotional support after abortions is non-existent. As a consequence, the few birth control options in Russia are either too physically dangerous, emotionally distressing, or expensive.

"If he beats you, he loves you." This Russian proverb is telling. The objectification of, and violence against, women has become far more prevalent in society over the past few years. Prostitution is still an appealing job to many women: they get pay and goods that they would have no conceivable chance of obtaining in the legal economy. Reports of rape and assault have increased dramatically over the past few years (14,000 were reported in 1992, 10,232 in the first eight months of 1993), either because of an increase in the absolute number, or the fact that more women are reporting abuse (Ministry of Interior Affairs qtd. in Vanderberg). Still, Natasha Gaidarenko, director of the Moscow Sexual Assault Recovery Centre, thinks that these statistics underestimate the problem by 80 to 90 per cent. Domestic violence is considered a foreign concept in Russia, presumably because there is the attitude that some violence in the home is not extraordinary. This attitude spills over into society, where women are regularly objectified and harassed. Further, the onus is often put on the women to prove her innocence in

cases of harassment or assault, rather than the reverse (i.e., what were you wearing, what did you say, how did you "invite" the attack?).

Women who are raped have very little recourse to action. The Moscow Centre is the first such centre in Russia and opened only in the spring of 1994. They have received calls from many women who have been ostracized by their families or com-



Nancy Reid

munities as prostitutes after speaking out. The law enforcement and judicial systems also leave much to be desired in this area. In an openly sexist society, Russian policemen are often unwilling to listen to women's concerns. A woman must provide physical evidence, which is not only difficult around uncaring policemen, but may be technically impossible (when a woman is assaulted with a weapon, or the threat of a weapon). As in North America, a woman cannot press charges on her own, the police officer on duty must decide whether to do so. As a result, many women fear the police as much as their attackers. The Sexual Assault Recovery Centre received one report by a woman who reported a rape to the police. Unfortunately, her attacker followed her and bribed the police officer on duty not to register the report.

Pushing through the court system is equally difficult. Judges are generally unsympathetic: the same societal attitudes operate here. Section 117 of the Russian Criminal Code deals with penalties for violent crimes like rape. It stipulates that a man convicted of raping a stranger may be sentenced to up to eight years. However, if he raped someone over whom he has "economic control," a spouse or employer, for example, he may only be sentenced up to five years. Convicted offenders rarely get the maximum sentence. Thus, increasing violence toward women is largely a hidden problem.

Not only must women face all these challenges in everyday life, they have very little political power with which to change the situation. Yekaterina Lakhova, the Advisor to the President on Women, Family and Children, has said that "so far there is no system to direct and manage the women's movement, no mechanism to spread the message throughout the country" (Lakhova qtd. in Schalkwyk 13). Women's groups have been slow to develop in Russia, partly because of a lack of interest, and partly because of the backlash against any group that demands unity and adherence to a rigid, cohesive line. Some umbrella groups, like *Soyuz Zhenshchin* (Union of Women) are emerging. *Soyuz Zhenshchin* is a broadly based non-governmental organization that has tried to put unions, associations, committees, and clubs that deal with women's issues in contact with one another. This organization also lobbies the government on behalf of Russian women. However, it cannot articulate the needs and desires of all women. Other, smaller groups try to deal with particular problems, but often do not enter the political fray because they feel that their concerns are not considered important or that the poli-

tical machine is too slow and corrupt.

There are women in the Federation Council, the upper chamber of Russia's parliamentary system, and the Duma, the lower house of representatives. The Federation Council has nine women out of 179 members (five per cent), while the Duma has 60 female deputies out of 449 (13.3 per cent). However, to an even greater extent than in Canada, women in the male dominated political process generally don't articulate women's interests so much as societal ones or the party line. An exception is the Women's Party of Russia (*Zhenshchiny Rossii*). The party was formed to represent women in parliament and received 8.1 per cent of the vote in the December 1993 elections (21 seats). After this impressive feat, *Zhenshchiny Rossii* has steadily been criticizing government legislation and suggesting initiatives. However, their strength is diluted by a strategic decision to have one or two party members on every committee, as opposed to being concentrated in one area. Thus, women in the Russian legislative process are rarely united.

In the government sector, women still occupy traditional posts in health and social welfare. While many have the power to put forth initiatives, few have the power to ensure the financial support needed for their realization. The RAFF, a government organization, can suggest that the Russian government buy contraceptives, but cannot force the government to do so. The Centre of Women, Family, and Gender can tell the government to implement measures to cut down on violence against women, but similarly cannot force their implementation. Moreover, while women are represented in parliamentary and government sectors, power lays in the executive in Russia, where women are underrepresented. Yekaterina Lakhova, the Advisor to the President, remains the only prominent woman in the executive. She heads a committee by the same name, but while its duties include assessing new legislation and introducing initia-

tives, it has little real power. Like most women's groups in Russia, their ability to influence far exceeds their ability to change existing programs or institute new ones.

Marina Kiena said in an interview that Russia women "are laughing because we have nothing left to lose" (Kiena). They do have a lot to gain. Any improvement in the economy is likely to help women. Traditional gender roles will have to change before women and young girls begin to think that they have the skills and abilities to make an equal contribution in the marketplace and at work, and only when societal roles change will women be able to demand that men play more of a role in domestic life. Women need to claim the right to safe, dependable control over their own fertility. They need to recognize that they have a right not to fear acts of violence against them, nor that any such action is the result of their behaviour. The fact that women are reluctant to organize and fight for change must be addressed. Women need to trust in the ability of the government and society to further the cause of equality. Simultaneously, they need more political power to begin changing both legislation and entrenched societal attitudes. Ironically, modern-day women can look to an unlikely source for inspiration—Lenin—who said:

If women are not drawn into public service...into political life, if women are not drawn out of their stupefying house and kitchen environment, it will be impossible to guarantee real freedom, it will be impossible to build even democracy.... (Kalistrova 38)

Beth Richardson received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Alberta in 1994. She is currently a Master's student in Russian Studies at the Carleton University. She spent the summer in Moscow working at Moscow News. She is particularly interested in Russian women and how they work within their political system.

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LYN LIFSHIN

Dorati's Mother

pulled from Odessa
 pulled from a dream
 of gypsies and balalaikas
 under the dark green
 pines herded into a
 cattle car crowded
 with women all
 bourgeois and not
 used to urinating in
 a corner shitting in
 full view on the floor
 Not used to being
 stepped on kicked
 Many screamed tore
 their own flesh
 wouldn't eat dog soup
 But she knew all
 Beethoven's violin
 pieces knew the
 viola parts the violin
 went over each part
 and didn't go mad

Lyn Lifshin's poetry appears earlier in this volume.

**Changing the Landscape:
 Ending Violence –
 Achieving Equality**
 Final Report of the
 Canadian Panel on
 Violence Against Women



Canadian women pay a high price for society's tolerance of violence and inequality toward them. How high a price was revealed in the grim reality of women's stories as the Panel made its journey across Canada. All women are vulnerable; but many- Aboriginal women, older women, poor women, women of colour, immigrant women, and women with disabilities- told of unspeakable suffering. These stories demonstrate the unmistakable link between inequality and vulnerability to violence, be it in the family, within institutions or in the workplace. Arguing that much of what women endure is preventable, the Panel outlines a National Action Plan, a blueprint for changing society that calls for zero tolerance of violence against women.

All of the Panel's findings and recommendations are collected in *Changing The Landscape: Ending Violence - Achieving Equality*. The *Executive Summary: National Action Plan* highlights the main points of this Final Report. Methods of implementation of the National Action Plan have been outlined in *The Community Kit*, a how-to-guide for implementing the Panel's recommendations at the community level. Part One of the kit helps you to gather information about violence against women in your community and decide what your communities needs are. Part Two of the kit helps you decide what steps need to be taken in your community to stop violence against women. The kit has been used successfully in many places. The experiences of 10 communities have been gathered together in *Community Stories: Taking Action Against Violence Against Women*; practical tips are given by community leaders on taking action on violence against women.

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