

# Women Under Perestroika and Doi Moi

## A Comparison of Marketization in Russia

by Ann Hibner Koblitz

*En Russie et au Viêt-nam, la privatisation a un impact différent sur les femmes et sur les hommes. L'auteure examine la com-*

### The situation in Russia

The economic and social situation in post-Soviet Russia has been deteriorating rapidly. In the course of 1992 alone the ruble dropped from a penny to under one-fifth of one cent. As of the end of 1994, the rate had plummeted to almost 3500 to the dollar (Stevenson). This plunge has brought Russian citizens into the ranks of the victims of hyperinflation (Bohlen 1993a). No end is in sight.

Russian per capita income fell 17 per cent from 1991 to 1992; Russian real wages in November 1993 were 61 per cent of real wages in 1990 (Bohlen 1993c; *The Korea Times*). And the latest figures indicate that women's incomes have gone from 70 per cent of men's in Soviet times to 45 per cent or even 40 per cent (Shagorodsky; Safire).

Although the impact of the economic reforms has been different in different sectors of the labor force, because women are (perhaps increasingly) concentrated in fixed income jobs in the still very large state sector, they are being disproportionately impoverished. Moreover, sectors of the labor force traditionally considered female (such as textiles, primary and secondary education, clerical work, and service professions) have been less able to negotiate even minimal increases.

Even in 1991, when unemployment was low in the post-socialist successor states of Eastern Europe, observers were already commenting on the preponderance of women in the unemployment offices (Khanga; vanden Heuvel).<sup>1</sup> That trend has become even more pronounced (see *Lenz Report*). Women in Russia make

up approximately 70 per cent of the newly jobless (vanden Heuvel). Not surprisingly, woman-headed households tend to constitute far more than their fair share of families living below the poverty line in Russia (and worldwide).

Newly privatized firms view women as economic liabilities because there is still a fair amount of protective legislation on the books from socialist times: maternal leave policies, on-site daycare mandates for large enterprises, and so on. Private corporations rarely comply with the laws, but they use their existence as an excuse to fire or not hire females (see WuDunn).

Jobs for women in the newly privatized firms are almost entirely at the bottom of the ladder, tied to looks and youth, or highly exploitative in other ways (Khanga; Ershova). Women can be requested to send in a full bathing suit photo with their job applications, want ads virtually always specify sex, and the cut-off age for women is generally thirty (for men it is usually forty-five) (vanden Heuvel; Khanga).

Some young women are beginning to feel that their only way out is to sell themselves. High school girls proudly cite prostitution as a career possibility (this might in part be a result of the popular music video *Moskvichka* and the film *Interdevushka*, both of which romanticize prostitution). And young Russian and Eastern European women are taking advantage of the opening of borders to become prostitutes in Turkey, the Netherlands, and possibly China as well (Cowell; Kristof).

Beginning in January 1992, subsidies for daycare, milk and other dairy products, and children's clothing were either sharply reduced or eliminated. The effects were disastrous (Bohlen 1992). Given women's socialization, the sacrifices required to care for one's family in catastrophic economic cir-

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*mercionalisation et les systèmes idéologiques en prenant en considération les différences sexuelles. Elle nous fait également part de la réaction des organismes de femmes des deux pays.*

Research from many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America indicates that the impact of market reforms is almost inevitably gender-differentiated, and the results for the majority of women are at best mixed, if not uniformly negative (see, for eg. MacIntosh). When market reforms are combined with an International Monetary Fund-mandated structural adjustment program, the results for women (and for the vast majority of the population) can be disastrous (see Ginocchio; Gladwin; Hossle; Jacobson). The post-Soviet Union is no exception.

The transition to a market economy has had an enormous impact on the lives of Russians, and a profoundly negative effect on women in particular. I will examine the different gender impact of privatization in Russian and compare it to the situation of women in Vietnam. I would like to suggest that strong women's groups and the support of the government can mitigate the negative impact of structural adjustment.

## and Vietnam

cumstances fall disproportionately on them. Women stand in lines, women worry about where the food is coming from, women deprive themselves of nutrition in order to provide their children (and even their husbands) with milk and other dietary necessities (Sanjian).

Many studies have shown that female so-called "discretionary income" is more likely to go to family needs than is male discretionary income. Thus, the increasing gendered salary differentials suggest that the well-being of the family is likely to deteriorate along with the income-generating possibilities of the mother (see Van Esterik; Jacobson).

For demographic and lifestyle reasons, there are far more Russian women than men who live past retirement age. (This is compounded by the fact that the retirement age in almost all employment sectors is 55 for women as opposed to 60 for men.) The pitifully small pensions, along with the end to subsidies on basic foodstuffs, health care, and housing, have signaled a vastly deteriorating situation for Russia's elderly, most of whom are women (Kelly).

The skyrocketing crime rate (Bohlen 1993b) has also hit women of all ages particularly hard. The new post-Soviet male appears to consider women as victims in every conceivable way. Incidences of rape and wife abuse are on the rise, and all of my female friends and colleagues have been mugged or assaulted at least once.

There is also a less tangible dimension to the whole marketization and privatization process which affects attitudes toward women in a systemic way. Namely, privatization, although it is a feminine noun in Russian, is being conceived of as a male process. Heads of private enterprises interviewed on television and radio have a tendency to refer to their work as a "man's job," and the

new elites are even less likely to include women than were the old Soviet era elites.

Throughout Eastern Europe, the percentages of women in legislatures and assemblies have plummeted in the last few years (by as much as 60 per cent in Russia, for example) (McCuaig). The dearth of women in the new parliaments has been a factor in their increasing exclusion from discourse on issues of fundamental importance. The most obvious example is the abortion debate, which, as many commentators have noted, is being carried on mostly by men. Restrictive legislation is being discussed and in some cases enacted by the parliaments of Eastern Europe and the Soviet successor states in the face of clear opposition by the majority of citizens. The process has moved most rapidly in Poland, but other states, including Russia, are beginning to have vocal, largely male-led anti-abortion movements. The relative ease with which these movements can transform their misogyny into law is one pernicious result of the new exclusion of women from legislative assemblies.

The prognosis in the former Soviet

The average Russian woman, even the average Moscow or St. Petersburg academic woman, knows nothing of Gaia (a feminist organization based in Moscow), the Institute of Gender Studies, or similar bodies. The tiny feminist movement is disorganized and alienated, and most Russian reformers, despite their frenzied eagerness to adopt what they perceive to be the essence of western economic models, dismiss western progressive movements, including the women's movement, as irrelevant, even ridiculous.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, as Suzanne McNally has pointed out, the vast majority of Russian politicians and reformers (female as well as male) appear to view the domestication of women as a necessary precondition for the establishment of liberal democratic government. For them, the imposition of a public versus private dichotomy made along male/female lines, and the institution of the so-called "family of the new type" (that is, a 1950s "Leave-It-To-Beaver" idealized model of industrial capitalism) are essential facets of a modern westernized state.<sup>3</sup> The pervasiveness of this viewpoint clearly works against women's activism in Russia.

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Union is far from good. To use Elena Ershova's eloquent formulation: "The result of this process [marketization] is the feminization of unemployment, the feminization of poverty, the feminization of hopelessness."

Unfortunately, in Russia women's efforts to counteract the differentiated gender impact of marketization are marginal and largely ineffective.

### The situation in Vietnam

One might ask whether there is any country in the midst of economic changes similar to those in Russia in which the gender impact has not been so marked, or at least in which women's groups have responded more effectively. I think it is possible to argue that the situation of women in Viet-

nam (particularly in the North) in many ways contrasts favorably with that of women in Russia, in large part because women's groups in Vietnam have taken an active, conscious role in alleviating some of the pernicious effects of marketization.

In my capacity as Director of a small foundation for the encouragement of women in science in developing countries, I visit Vietnam every

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second winter, most recently in December 1992-January 1993 and December 1994. At first I was expecting to see the same deterioration in women's position, the same horribly differentiated gender impact of privatization in Vietnam as I had seen in the former USSR. Moreover, I was prepared to see the Vietnam Women's Union enter a period of sharp decline, as had the old Soviet Women's Committee, and I anticipated that the rhetoric and iconography of Vietnamese *doi moi*<sup>4</sup> would be every bit as masculinist as Soviet *perestroika* and post-Soviet privatization ideologies.

However, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the main grassroots organization of Vietnamese women—the Vietnam Women's Union (vwu)—not only is not in decline, but is actually flourishing. Their involvement in rural income-generating projects and urban retraining programs is greater than ever; they are (amazingly in this era of deteriorating health levels all over the globe) managing to increase the number of women with access to cheap pre-natal care. At a time when the percentage of women in parliaments in Eastern Europe and Russia has declined precipitously, the percentage of women in the National Assembly of Vietnam has remained

steady at about 18 per cent.

Moreover, the Vice President of Viet-nam is Nguyen Thi Binh, former chief negotiator for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, and an active member of the governing councils of the vwu. In no sense are Binh's duties as vice president limited to ceremonial roles—that is, she is not a token or a figurehead, nor is she

someone who only pays lip service to the goals of equality for women.

Members of the Presidium of the vwu say that, if anything, they are receiving more support and respect than ever before.<sup>5</sup>

They emphasize that it was the government that gave them seed money for their revolving credit program designed to benefit poor rural women, and that the government initially subsidized their clinics and pre-natal programs. They point to the Family Law of 1986, with its strengthened rights for women in the workplace and within the family, and its admonition that men must share equally in household tasks (*Bulletin de Droit*).

vwu activists see their current mission as the mitigation of some of the potentially disastrous consequences of marketization for the groups most likely to be hardest hit by the economic changes. They are targeting women of all economic and social sectors, but they particularly want to include the rural poor, women in need of retraining, woman-headed households, and prostitutes. And they well know that an open door business and tourism policy means rising prostitution and drug addiction, and a concomitant rise in AIDS risk.

vwu activists are also conscious that, apart from the escalation in AIDS risk, marketization processes almost inevitably signal falling health indicators and decreased access to health care for the majority of the popula-

tion (Ginocchio; Efron). They are committed to keeping the cost of medical services low, and they have established a sliding scale of fees at their clinics. Their success in some respects has been absolutely phenomenal, and includes recognition from the United Nations for having the most improved survival rates of under five-year-old children of any of the so-called "least developed countries."<sup>6</sup>

In stark contrast to the situation in Russia and Eastern Europe, abortion rights are not under siege in Vietnam. Abortion is fully legal, though its incidence is decreasing slightly because of successful campaigns by the vwu to encourage other forms of contraceptive use (Lux). Perhaps more significantly, the vwu has managed to preserve the right to low cost abortions. Their network of clinics charges 3,000 to 5,000 *dongs* (about 30 to 50 cents at the current rate of exchange—an amount roughly corresponding to one-half to one day's wage of a semi-skilled worker). In Eastern Europe and Russia, abortion is now forbidden, greatly restricted, and/or extremely expensive. In Russia abortion costs upwards of five months' salary, and the waiting lines are long (Frankland).

#### Why is marketization's impact so different?

Part of the explanation for the reduced gender impact of marketization in Vietnam as opposed to Russia centers around the unique historical role and nature of the Vietnam Women's Union, whose activists have been largely responsible for defending women's interests during the economic reforms.<sup>7</sup> One might say that historical circumstances at least partly account for their energetic and sophisticated response to the challenges of *doi moi*. The vwu has always been a powerful grassroots organization, and for many years they have placed a major emphasis on training programs, care of marginal groups, and income generation.

Since the demise of the Russian

women's organization *Zhenotdel* in 1930, most likely there has never been in any country a nationwide women's organization as influential and effective in practical matters as the VWU. And in all the socialist and former socialist world, there is no other women's organization which enjoys such support from the government and such prestige among the population.<sup>8</sup>

There are several factors that have caused the VWU activists to become acutely sensitive to the dangers to women that are inherent in marketization and in economic and cultural opening to the West. In the first place, many of them studied or worked in or made extensive visits to the USSR and Eastern Europe during the socialist period, and have been paying close attention to post-socialist developments. They are cognizant of the tragic situation of women's groups in the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe, and they are aware of the deterioration in women's material and social conditions in those countries. In the second place, the experiences of the VWU activists since 1975 in the south of Vietnam—in campaigns to rehabilitate prostitutes, decrease female illiteracy and unemployment, and cope with the other consequences of the U.S. occupation—have sensitized them to the down-side of capitalism. A third factor enhancing the awareness of VWU officials is their proximity to a country which is suffering extensively in this regard; namely, Thailand. They see the ecological devastation of the countryside, the pollution, prostitution, and drug addiction in the cities, as well as the AIDS epidemic, and they are determined to fight.<sup>9</sup>

### *Doi moi* vs. *perestroika*: economic differences

*Doi moi* was introduced in Vietnam somewhat earlier than *perestroika* was introduced in the USSR,<sup>10</sup> but changes were made more gradually. The population did not seem to view the reforms as entirely alien, since Vietnam has always had a certain

poll of the Russian population found that only four per cent of those surveyed felt better off than in 1985.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to these differences, which relate to the well-being of the population as a whole, there is a further contrast which bears particularly on the gender question. Namely, there is a significant disparity between the way economic processes are concep-

tualized in Vietnam as opposed to Russia. In Russia, the transfer to capitalism is commonly conceived of as male. The key sectors of the economy are viewed as those that are most associated with men—heavy industry, stock trading, metallurgy, and so on. In part, this is a legacy of Stalinist times, when everything positive—and masculine—was associated with large industry, while the rural sector was viewed as the epitome of backwardness, and as feminine. For example, Elena Mukhina's famous statue near the grounds of the old Soviet economic exhibition *VDNKh* in Moscow depicted a male worker holding up the hammer symbolizing the industrial proletariat, and,

slightly smaller and slightly to his rear, a female peasant holding up the agricultural symbol of the sickle. This male/female iconography was often repeated in statuary, poster, and other art forms.

In Vietnam, however, heavy industry has never been the focus, and the new direction under *doi moi* is no exception. Rather, the stress is on household economy, on the informal sector, on family agriculture, and on light industry. I think it is possible to argue that this very emphasis is naturally more favorable to appreciation of women's contributions to the economy. In contrast to Soviet and (even more strongly) post-Soviet iconography, Vietnamese depictions of



Deidre Scherer, "Earth," fabric and thread, 10" x 9", January 1992.  
Photo: Jeff Baird

amount of small scale private enterprises—small businesses and the sale by individuals of certain consumer goods and food items.

In sharp contrast to Russia, Vietnam does not have a high inflation rate, and its economic growth rate has been around nine or ten per cent (*Indochina Chronology* 1993; 1994). The majority of Vietnamese citizens appear to view themselves as better off than they were before *doi moi* commenced. A 1993 survey (done by a foreign firm) of households in Hanoi found that 56 per cent of families consider themselves more comfortable than a year ago, and 24 per cent see no change (*Indochina Chronology* 1993). By contrast, a recent opinion

job categories are more likely to vary the gender of the images: soldiers, scientists, peasants, and industrial workers are portrayed variously as male and female.

### The analysis by Vietnam women's union activists

Activists of the VWU are themselves quite clear about why they have succeeded where their counterparts in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have failed.<sup>12</sup> They emphasize that the Soviet Women's Committee never had a base at the grassroots level. When finally they woke up to the necessity of acquiring such a base (and indeed, according to Nguyen Kim Cuc, requested assistance and training from the VWU in this regard), it was too late.

Moreover, VWU activists say that they were and are more flexible and independent than were their Soviet and post-Soviet counterparts. The VWU has been able to "self-renovate" (in the words of Vuong Thi Hanh), and thus easily has switched their chief emphasis from agitational to economic and health activities as the need arose. Also, when the government could no longer subsidize VWU programs, the Union had an insurance contribution plan already well elaborated. They were able to take up the government slack without delay.

Despite justifiable pride in their accomplishments, VWU activists have no illusions about their situation. As Nguyen Kim Cuc explained:

*We know about the dangers of doi moi; we know that poverty is increasing. But we see, we learn, and we make recommendations to the government... We are sustainable, popular, and influential. We can and do make a difference.*

### Conclusion

Recently, some U.S. feminists have taken trips to Vietnam, become instant experts on the situation, and are expounding upon what Vietnamese

women need. "An increasingly vocal women's movement, emboldened by the reading of Western feminist classics" [emphasis mine] is Susan Brownmiller's condescending description of women's movements in Vietnam, and the rhetoric of some Berkeley women's studies faculty, at least as portrayed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, is similarly patronizing (Gillotte). Surely it is not too much to expect that western feminist scholars would recognize, acknowledge, and respect the longstanding commitment of Vietnamese women activists to their own indigenous brand of feminism.

In no sense am I trying to claim that the Vietnamese situation is wonderful. Structural adjustment policies almost inevitably lead to increased income disparities, and the impact of the policies has been gender differentiated wherever they are introduced. My purpose has been to suggest that it is possible to mitigate the negative effects on women and the poor, but only if there exist strong grassroots women's organizations and a supportive and aware government. Such institutions are found in present-day Vietnam, but not, unfortunately, in Russia.

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<sup>1</sup>The newsletter of the Association

for Women in Slavic Studies, *Women East—West (WEW)*, had been publishing anecdotal and fragmentary information about this for years before the phenomenon of male/female disparities in unemployment and re-employment finally caught the attention of the mainstream media.

<sup>2</sup>The sources for this are numerous, though largely anecdotal. There are many references to the hostility toward feminism in the *Canadian Woman Studies* volume on "Soviet Women" (Winter 1989) as well as in most issues of WEW. Also, Ershova and Sanjian offer several rather shocking examples in their 1993 ISA presentations.

<sup>3</sup>New draft laws for the Russian Republic deprive women of many of the rights that were inscribed in the old Soviet constitution. As Elena Ershova put it in her ISA presentation, "Now we are losing even paper laws."

<sup>4</sup>*Doi moi*, translated literally, means "renovation" or "renewal." Generally, it signifies a reexamination and reform of economic structures. More rarely, the term has a political connotation.

<sup>5</sup>Except where otherwise noted, the following discussion is based on December 1992, January 1993, and December 1994 meetings with VWU officials, including Mme. Nguyen Thi Binh (Vice President of Vietnam and Chair of the Kovalevskaia Prize Committee of the VWU), Dr. Vuong Thi Hanh (Vice President of the VWU), Dr. Nguyen Kim Cuc (head of international relations and former director of the VWU's mother and child welfare programs), and Dr. Pham Thi Tran Chau (member of the VWU Presidium and Professor of Biochemistry at Hanoi University).

<sup>6</sup>Descriptions of several VWU programs can be found in the VWU journal *Women of Vietnam*. See, for example, No. 1 (1993) and No. 1 (1994)

<sup>7</sup>Women have been leaders in the struggle against foreign invasion for the past two millenia. Many of the founders of the VWU were active in the struggle for national liberation against the French and Americans. More recently, Nguyen Thi Dinh, the late president of the VWU, was a com-

mander of guerilla units in the South during the anti-colonialist wars. VWU leaders have immediate access to high government officials (and are highly-placed themselves—the VWU has equivalent status to a government ministry).

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Decision No. 163 of the Vietnamese government (published as a supplement to *Women of VietNam*, No. 4 (1988), which calls for increased government support for the VWU. One can, of course, question to what extent this directive is followed in practice. The fact remains, however, that now there is nothing remotely like this even on paper in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the directive has recently (January 1994) been supplemented by Resolution No. 04/NQ-TW, which reiterates the government's commitment to women's emancipation, and the special concern of both the government and the VWU for women of particularly vulnerable groups (poor and single mothers, prostitutes, and ethnic, handicapped, and religious women).

<sup>9</sup>The World Health Organization conservatively estimates one million full-blown AIDS cases in Thailand by the year 2000.

<sup>10</sup>The term was brought into common usage by the time of the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1986.

<sup>11</sup>Lecture by Vadim Radaev, January 1992. Academy of Sciences Institute of Economics in Moscow, Russia.

<sup>12</sup>The following is based on discussions with Nguyen Thi Binh, Vuong Thi Hanh, and Nguyen Kim Cuc in December 1994.

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