

Women's Activism In Russia

Losses And Gains 1989-1993

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L'auteure examine le développement de l'activisme féministe en Russie en concentrant sur les multiples changements qui sont survenus depuis 1989.

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A woman in a red kerchief with the alphabet, fighting illiteracy; a woman-toiler active in constructing huge industrial plants in the 'thirties; a woman-defender of the Soviet Motherland in the rear and at the fronts of the Second World War; a mother and wife who kept the home fire burning.... These are only some of the role models forcefully imposed on women and passionately implemented by the Communist state that controlled and directed Soviet women's activism since 1917.

The collapse of the totalitarian regime based on a one-party system created new opportunities for political activity and for the emergence of women's organizations autonomous of state structures. The purpose of this paper is to give the historical background of contemporary women's activism, to focus on the advantages and problems for building of current women's movement, and to discuss the performance of the political movement "Women of Russia" in the 1993 parliamentary elections.

Historical overview

The entry on "women's movement in Russia" in the key Soviet reference book *The Large Soviet Encyclopedia* says that the goals and tasks of the women's movement in USSR were inseparable from those of Soviet society as a whole. This definition is good proof of the fact that, despite a long history of public organizations in this country, there had never been a real, independent women's movement.

By granting women constitutional equality as early as 1918, the Communist regime emphasized its commitment to solve the "women's question." In the 1920's, women's sections were formed in the Communist Party local organizations and were aimed at integrating women into public life, fighting illiteracy and carrying out educational work among women, and at arranging boarding

schools and orphan homes for children. Dissolved at the end of the decade, these sections were never reestablished.

Later on, women's activism was guided and directed by the Communist Party through local party committees and soviets at plants, factories, collective farms, etc., as well as through women's councils, women's clubs, and recreation and reading rooms, which were also controlled by the state. The Soviet Women's Committee, the main women's organization in the Soviet Union, was established in 1941 in Moscow to combat international fascism. After the Second World War the activities of the Committee were visibly extended. The Soviet Women's Committee has described itself as a non-governmental, public organization, aimed at promoting women's labor, social, and political activity, as well as women's role in the decision-making process. However, it was governed and sponsored by the state and pursued Communist Party policy. Since official ideology stated that the "women's question" had been solved under socialism, this organization concentrated mainly on international contacts with a view to demonstrating the success and achievements of Soviet women's emancipation.

The Soviet Women's Committee had a broad network across the country. The women's councils in industries and other enterprises, first created in the 1930's, were officially aimed at assisting women to get professions, raising their consciousness, and arranging family life (Pukhova 4). Yet, the agenda for the councils was set not by their members, but by the local soviets or party organizations.

Women's councils were granted more independence in shaping their agenda in the first years of perestroika when they were reactivated, with the old councils restored and consolidated and the new ones set up. Apparently, the women's councils had varying political significance and influence. Some councils did not survive in the post-perestroika years, others are not at all conspicuous, while several managed to act independently and became politically active (like the women's organization "Prologue" in the town of Zhukovskii, which emerged from the women's council of the central Aerodynamic Institute).

It is obvious that the women's movement in the Soviet Union developed was a part of Communist Party policy toward women. This policy was double-edged: on the one hand, the over-centralised and inefficient Soviet economy badly needed labor resources and could not survive without women's participation. On the other hand, housework and the care of children and families has remained firmly within the female sphere of responsibility. In this context, the state cunningly manipulated women: as living standards rose, the priority of domestic responsibili-

ties gained ground and women were praised for their homemaking qualities. However, no room was left for the independent women's movement. The attempt of a group of Leningrad women to express dissatisfaction with their social status through their feminist journal *Maria* at the end of the 1970s was suppressed and its organizers were persecuted (see Fisher).

Though controlled and guided by the state, women's activism under the Communist regime was not entirely fruitless. Women's involvement in the labor force, education, and public life raised their awareness and under-

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standing of the problems they faced, such as discriminatory firing and hiring practices, inequality between men's and women's wages, feminization of professions, lack of promotion for women, political under-representation, etc. Moreover, the network of women's clubs and councils, in a sense, prepared the ground for the emergence of the grassroots women's movement after 1989.

New activism

Perestroika in the Soviet Union allowed women to speak out about the problems and difficulties they face, thus paving the way for a broadly based dialogue about gender equality and for a flurry of women's activism after 1985. Three periods may be identified in the new women's movement in the country. The first one, from the beginning of *perestroika* until the collapse of the Soviet Union (1985-91), was a time of denial, sharp criticism and overthrow of political structures of the past, and mushrooming of the new independent groups and organizations. The number of women's groups rapidly increased: there are about 300 registered women's organizations in Russia today, five of which have international status, two—national, and 14—republican (Report on Implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in the Russian Federation 24). Although several feminist groups, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, claimed to speak on behalf of all Russian women, the movement was developing mainly at the grassroots level.

Different kinds of women's mobilization ranged from economic activities (such as running small businesses or providing services, training, and retraining), to consciousness-raising and women's advocacy, gender and women's studies research projects, and political lobbying, etc. It is

important to note the emergence of new charismatic political women-leaders (Galina Starovoitova, Bella Kurkova, Ella Pamfilova), some of whom had their start in the former dissident movement (Larisa Bogoraz, Valeria Novodvorskaya, Elena Bonner). Also, new issues emerged on the agenda of the women's movement, such as violence against women, wife battering, prostitution, and rights of lesbians—subjects that were taboo under the Communist regime. As a result of the efforts of women's groups, the first crisis centres in St. Petersburg and Moscow for the sexually abused and hot lines in almost all big Russian cities were set up, including the Moscow Sexual Assault Recovery Centre "Sisters."

Euphoria over independence and freedom of choice was one of the distinctive features of the women's movement at this stage. As a result of deep mistrust of the centralized control they had faced for decades, women's groups were reluctant to establish formal networks or "umbrella organizations." This suspiciousness was extended to the Union of Russian Women, the new name for the Soviet Women's Committee, which is no longer sponsored by and affiliated with the state. In describing this stage of the woman's movement, one Russian expert on women's studies emphasized "that it was a period of anarchy, which put an end to the integral women's movement of the Soviet regime."

The next stage of the new women's movement (from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 until the 1993 December elections) was a time of identification of issues and challenges facing Russian women in the post-*perestroika* years. Previous euphoria was substituted by bitter recognition that *perestroika* turned out to be a man's project. The abolition of Communist Party control over social relations and institutions and complete indifference towards the interests of women on the part of the new regime offered greater uncertainties for women.

There is a remarkable consensus in the assessments by women's groups of the problems they face, especially the impact on women's status of the ugly transition to a market economy. This impact is considered to be devastating in the context of the official ideology's emphasis on the domestic roles of women—the "return to the family campaign" aimed at ousting females from the labor force. Many women activists note that the status of women in Russia has deteriorated even in comparison with the Communist regime.

In the past, men and women enjoyed the Soviet policy of full employment with women having outnumbered men in the labor force. In the transitional period, women became the first victims of unemployment: 67.9 per cent of those unemployed are women and they face greater difficulties than men finding new jobs. Moreover, 10 per cent of registered unemployed females are the only breadwinners in the family, and about half of them have small children (Report on the Implementation of the UN Convention 31).

In the social sphere, women have also lost advantages

they were granted in the past. Women with children are mostly affected by the introduction of the paid child care, a social service that used to be free under the Communists. In addition, the increase in the cost of social services and drop in real incomes places an extra burden on women, who are forced to work longer hours in the home in order to offset the losses. Finally, though the health care is still officially free, as it used to be in the Soviet Union, some services (such as abortion) are now on the list of paid ones and may soon become inaccessible for many women. Also, with the emergence of paid medical services the quality of

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the free public health is rapidly deteriorating—actually leaving no choice for those who need treatment but to pay. The same is true for free education, another major achievement of socialism, which is slowly being ousted by private schools, lyceums, and colleges.

In politics, women's participation in the past in legislative bodies was governed by quotas. Although unpopular among the women, the quotas provided them with one-third of the seats in the USSR Supreme Soviet. Women also made up about 27.9 per cent of Communist Party members, 52.4 per cent of the Young Communist League, and 35.8 per cent of the Central Trade Unions membership (Women and Children in the USSR 28-29). With the lifting of the quotas, women's representation dramatically dropped: they accounted for only 5.4 per cent of deputies of the Russian Parliament elected in 1990. According to unofficial data, females constituted only about 10 per cent of the membership of the political parties registered by October 1993 (except for greater involvement among the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats). As the director of the Center for Gender Studies, Anastasia Posadskaya, emphasized, "*perestroika* has an innate contradiction—while moving toward political and economic pluralism, but in terms of gender relations, it is also a period of post-Communist patriarchal renaissance" (Second Independent Women's Forum 7).

Recognition of these problems and challenges lead women activists to understand that coherent action at the local and national level was strongly needed. Common perception of key women's concerns laid a strong foundation for developing links and joint initiatives. Women also realized that in the absence of other institutions, the state is the main problem solver for women's issues and that women have to mobilize in order to influence state policy. Despite the fear of centralization still posing a barrier to formalizing linkages,

new networks with similar goals of sharing information and launching joint projects were established: the first was initiated by the Independent Women's Forum as a follow-up to the national conferences of 1991 and 1992 held in Dubna; the second, led by the organization "Gaia"; and the third, by the Union of Russian Women uniting 100 women's councils with about 2 million people.

When discussing the losses and gains of women's activism, it should be noted that the main achievements of the post-Communist period—freedom and choice—were downgraded by a sharp worsening in women's status. As for the movement itself, it lost the financial support and close links with the state that it had in the past. Along with the lack of influence on state policy, the movement faces severe financial problems: many women's groups are funded by foreign organizations and activists express the notion that there is no scarcity of ideas but strong need for money.

Elections 1993

The third stage of the new women's activism in Russia is connected with the formation of the political movement Women of Russia and its unexpectedly strong showing in the December 1993 elections to the Federal Assembly (the Russian Parliament). Three women's organizations—Women's Union of Russia, the Association of Women Entrepreneurs and the Russian Navy Women's Association combined their forces to win 8.13 per cent of the votes and to set up a women's faction in the State Duma (the lower house of the Parliament). After the 1993 elections, there were 69 women in the Federal Assembly, making up 11.4 per cent of its MPs (Report on Implementation of the UN Convention 23).

The election platform of the coalition focused on free health care and education, family, human rights, prohibition of violence and pornography, and societal peace and reconciliation. Women of Russia was criticized by other parties for a lack of understanding of the reforms and was also attacked by some women's groups for not giving its vision of how to improve the status of women.

Unfortunately, there have been no surveys available concerning the electorate of the Women of Russia. However, a public poll conducted in November 1993 showed that three-quarters of women polled approved of the creation of the political movement Women of Russia. According to an interview with Ludmila Zavadskaya from the women's faction in the Duma, its constituency is dominated by young families under 30, and that was amazing for the organizers of the campaign who expected to get their main support from pensioners (Chipman and Issrealyan 1-2).

Several factors promoted the strong showing of Women of Russia. The first was part of a wide protest against reform parties, reflecting the overwhelming disillusionment with the reform process and the hardships it brings. The second factor was related to the traditional belief in

women's ability, as mothers, to save the country and to overcome the crisis. The third factor revealed the well-established regional and local network and good connections inherited by the Union of Russian Women from the Soviet state. Thanks to these contacts, the coalition managed to get support of two big trade unions. Finally, the women's block had its mass media outlets (the radio station "Nadejda," newspapers).

Parallel to Women of Russia, other women's groups ran in the 1993 election campaign. The Women's League, created on the eve of the elections, brought together 17 organizations, including the Gaia network. Inspired by a promise on the part of the Fatherland block to give one-third of the candidacies to women, the League was active in its election campaign. However, despite an impressive undertakings of the Women's League nominees, the Fatherland failed to obtain required 100,000 voter signatures and could not be represented in the Duma. In addition, several women activists were nominated on the lists of the other parties and movements or run independent election campaigns.

The 1993 elections have demonstrated that the women's movement in Russia, though taking its disparate and disunited first steps, has good potential and resources for action. It has been suggested that the women's faction in the Parliament may be a real gain for women in terms of their representation even in comparison with the Soviet period when the quota system provided a larger number of women deputies. It was believed that fewer but more independent women will be better at lobbying on behalf of women than the "puppet women" of the old quota system. However, after two year's performance of the Women of Russia in the Duma, many grassroots women's groups are sceptical about the ability of the faction to speak out for the women's interests. Also, the faction was strongly criticized for not taking an active stand in the opposition against the war in Chechnya. However, much will depend on the women's movement itself, which needs to generate a national agenda, strategy, and tactics to influence the Government and Parliament.

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Self-Indulgence

I in the privacy
of my un-paid-for air conditioned Volvo
with its automatic locks snapped down
make you the occasion of poems
scribbled in the McDonald's drive-
through.

I give you back yourself
in the dignity of honest labour
as I write myself into or out of
acts you will never receive,
you who are your own first person.

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