

## New women's organisations

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Perestroika has not brought positive changes for women. The economic situation coupled with social and political tensions make the everyday lives of women even harder. Shopping and childcare mean emotional stress. Family ties are breaking, the young do not want to understand their elders, and women as mothers suffer this distancing.

A patriarchal tradition prescribes women's roles and place in society. The Soviet mass-media, generally, reacts in tune with party ideology. Most publications on the 'woman question' are influenced by gender-role stereotypes. In this context, propaganda to send women home is strong. From conservative writers, the Church and the media come the familiar charge that the high divorce rate, juvenile delinquency and alcoholism can be directly attributed to women's absence from the family.

So widespread cultural attitudes about 'woman's place' limit women's sense of collective oppression; disparate treatment does not necessarily generate moral indignation. As a result of very scarce information about Western women's movements, feminism is almost unknown, or rather associated with the state exploitation of women in the labour force, where they work in unskilled jobs for low wages. The total responsibility of women for childcare and domestic chores is never questioned.

Social and political changes, though, have not broken the silence on the woman question. Many of the new political groups, organisations and parties have ignored women's issues. Not one of them, so far, has included women in their programmes and platforms. So the ideas of democracy have not yet been extended to questioning male power in the USSR. Nevertheless, quite a number of women's organisations have been formed in recent years. They can be divided into three types: formal/official; informal/unofficial; and feminist organisations.

### Formal/official women's organisations

Formal/official women's organisations include two subgroups: nomenklatura institutions, transformed into supposedly 'new' organisations, and new organisations formed 'from above'.

One example of the first type is found in the new name for an old structure of the local Soviet Women's Committee (SWC) in Leningrad. It is now called 'The Association of Women of Leningrad and Leningrad District'. The ruling organ consists of the same 'apparat' of the SWC. Its function is almost the same, except that its economic status is now based on sponsorship from state companies. It also makes money by publishing a women's newspaper entitled *Leningradka* (Leningrad Woman). Since any kind of publishing activity is very difficult due to a lack of paper and access to printing presses, we can deduce their strong connections with the CPSU – still an extremely powerful organisation which controls all the means of printing and publishing and, as well, enjoys a state supply of paper.

The new organisations formed 'from above' could be called a 'new nomenklatura' since they are successfully using a pretence of concern for women with the aim of creating connections with the West. These include various professional women's clubs, such as 'Women writers', 'women journalists' and the Soviet national department of the international organisation of women in cinema (KIWI) which has departments in many cities of the USSR. The aim of these organisations is usually purely pragmatic – to make money, to travel abroad and to find new business contacts in professional spheres.

Herein lies the important factor of cultural misunderstanding between East and West. Most of the Western women's organisations have very little knowledge of the reality of Soviet life. They sometimes mistakenly assume that any organisation of women is feminist, or at least is developing in that direction. Sometimes, though, the members of these organisations are taking advantage of the old contacts and connections used by Soviet women of the 'nomenklatura' in order to achieve economic profit with the help of similar representatives from the West.

Various conferences provide examples of the use of these sorts of connections, such as the 'Women's Summit' in the USA in May 1990 and the Soviet–American conference in Alushta in November of the same year, where a lot of different official women from the USSR met with American feminists. The results of these meetings have, unfortunately, had very little impact on the lives of millions of ordinary Soviet women.



Sometimes there is a real confusion of purposes and activities. When the Women's Press Club was organised in Moscow in 1989, Western women journalists who were invited to the opening ceremony could not understand their Soviet colleagues. The Western members arrived expecting a serious discussion on the problems of women in professional spheres. For their Soviet sisters it was only a pretext for attracting publicity for this club. Even the way they were dressed was different. Westerners were dressed for business and Soviets were dressed for the party. Ironically, the final part of the ceremony was the election of 'Man of the Year' – the honour was given to Nikolai Ryzhkov, the Soviet prime-minister...

The list of organisations in this category is very long. They include: the Association of Women of Leningrad and Leningrad Region; the Association of Women 'Creativity' (with departments in Moscow and Leningrad); the Women's Department of the Leningrad State Management Training Centre (which was recently opened by the Leningrad Regional Committee of CPSU); the International Centre entitled 'Future of Woman'; KIWI – International Association of Women in Cinema; and various *zhensovety* in all areas of work. The leading organ is now called the Union of Women of Russia (*Soiuz Zhenshchin Rossii*).

### **Informal/unofficial women's groups**

Informal/unofficial groups include various kinds of women's organisations of different orientations. They are numerous and can be divided into the following subgroups: political, business and social/charity/humanitarian.

Sometimes, however, their purposes mix, and a business organisation may also deal with cultural and charity issues. A typical process throughout the country is for some *zhensovety* to be transformed from official nomenklatura organisations, formed from above, into informal, independent groups geared to social and political activity. This indicates a process of transformation of the old totalitarian structures into new ones, forming a new system of relations, which is a necessary part of the process of building a civil society.

The largest subgroup here embraces all kinds of business groups, courses, enterprises and clubs. Activities include the organisation of small businesses for single mothers at home, the provision of different funds to help single mothers or mothers with large families (three or more children). These organisations vary in type and scope – some of



them are local, even for just one district, some are national. Women in the USSR seem to be concerned with the economic problems that are awaiting us during the period of transfer to a market economy. As a mouthpiece for these new concerns, a newspaper called *Business-woman* appeared in October 1990 (*Delovaia Zhenshchina*). This newsletter is closest to feminist issues. It interviews women politicians and focuses on the active participation of women in the country's political, social and economic life. Other new papers include *Lenin-gradka*, *Natali* and *Polina* in Leningrad and *Moskvichka*, *Women over 18* and others in Moscow. These are still searching for their identity, confusing patriarchal material with more or less 'emancipated' ideas.

Single mothers organise small traditional women's businesses, like knitting and making clothes. Big family groups (organised mainly by mothers) tend to start cooperative farming since women are concerned about the ecological problems of big cities, as well as how to feed three or more children, in current circumstances.

Many groups are organising to protect women from unemployment. Such is the concern, for example, of an organisation called VERA in Leningrad. VERA is comprised of women working in the system of higher education (teachers, professors at universities, as well as students). They have a small enterprise and a cultural programme, but they are a non-profit organisation. Defending women from unemployment, they organise courses for retraining women and help find alternative jobs for them. Also their programme includes 'cultural development'.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it has become a very popular slogan now to return 'spiritual values' to our society, to 'revive culture'. Many women's and humanitarian organisations include them in their platforms.

Some of the *zhensovet* deal with these problems too, particularly those which are transforming themselves and gaining an 'informal' status. One *zhensovet* in the town of Zhukovskii, near Moscow fits this description. It is led by Ol'ga Bessolova and its members organised a women's political club in 1989. They were active in the election campaign for the Congress of People's Deputies and supported the well-known journalist Larisa Kuznetsova, as their candidate (who was unsuccessful). The group, however, is developing very well.

Political organisations constitute another large subgroup. There are two women's political parties: *Edinaia Partiia Zhenshchin* (United Women's Party) in Leningrad; and *Partiia Zhenshchin Suverennoi Rossii* (the Party of Women of Sovereign Russia) founded in Tomsk, in Siberia. The Leningrad party has a rather vague platform, declaring as



its goal a total change of politics and society, but does not explain how this will come about. It recognizes that discrimination against women exists in the USSR, but its programme does not make clear how to tackle this. In fact, the Programme is a mixture of universal humanitarian ideas and outcries against discrimination against women. It argues that women should be equally represented in the institutions of power, but how this should, or could, happen is not indicated. The idea of 'uniting all women in one powerful political party', expressed by its leader Vera Kuril'chenko in slogans like 'all grains of female intellect should be brought together' seems to find few supporters among women.<sup>2</sup> She is not very popular in the media. Most of her interviews on television, radio and in the press have been rather critical of her, despite being done exclusively by women. The party was registered in October 1990, but since then it has achieved little. According to Kuril'chenko, its major concern now is to collect enough money for effective political activity. So members are trying to organise an enterprise as well as fundraising. How large the party is remains unclear, since it lacks serious public relations.

It is hard to say how well this organisation fits into the definition of 'party'. But in Soviet political life, lack of any political education or knowledge of theory is typical. Soviet society is now at the stage of learning politics in practice. It could be called a process of becoming subjects of politics out of being its objects.

The Women's Party of Sovereign Russia seems to be more effective and less demagogic. Its members' desire to stay independent of other male-dominated political organisations creates a basis for a future feminist movement. Unlike the United Party of Women, they do not wish to grow into a huge organisation which unites all women, despite their differences. Their tactic is to be careful; to think first, then act. The only organisation with whom they agreed to liaise on some political matters is the Popular Movement of Tomsk, which is quite flexible in structure and in organising principles.<sup>3</sup>

The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers is a more specific women's organisation, initially formed in Moscow and Leningrad in 1989 by mothers of veterans who fought in Afghanistan. They came together to provide war invalids, usually young and severely injured men, with some kind of social security. The mothers wanted the men to receive qualified medical help, wheelchairs, artificial limbs, jobs and pensions. They organised demonstrations and campaigns with these goals in mind. Later these women were joined by mothers of soldiers serving in the regular army. This was after a campaign raged in the media about



*dedovshchina* – the system of brutal slavery and discrimination to which soldiers in their first year of service are subjected by soldiers in their second year. This phenomenon is widespread in the Soviet Army and includes hard beatings, rape and even the murder of young soldiers. The Moscow group of the Committee is particularly strong and managed to organise a demonstration outside the Kremlin demanding protection for their sons. Its representatives were even received by Gorbachev.<sup>4</sup>

Among various women's groups there are many who are preoccupied with cultural activities. There are collectives of mothers with children, organised around art and dance or gymnastics and sports. There are also women's clubs like *Preobrazhenie* (Transfiguration) in Moscow, whose programme is based on better self-realisation of women's creativity.

There are also women's organisations of an anti-feminist orientation, or organisations based on conservative, patriarchal values – like *Caritas* in Lithuania. *Caritas* is pro-life and pro-family. One anti-feminist group in Leningrad is called *Rossia* (Russia). Its size is unknown, but its leader is Ekaterina Miasnikova – an artist and political activist. *Rossia* is part of a conservative (nationalistic) movement called the Movement of the Spiritual Rebirth of Russia (*Dvizhenie za Dukhovnoe Vozrozhdenie Rossii*). According to their programme, a woman is first of all a mother and a wife and she is responsible for the spiritual education of children and men. Her femininity is a necessary trait, needed for spiritual revival (similar to the position of American Mormons). Part of their programme is the 'restoration of the Russian Home', which means some kind of traditional community. Most of their ideas are characteristic of the Russian nationalist movement.<sup>5</sup>

### Feminist organisations

I refer here to all groups that consider themselves feminist, notwithstanding the meaning they give to that term. The first group that called itself 'feminist' was SAFO (*Svobodnaia Assotsiatsiia Feministskikh Organizatsii* – the Free Association of Feminist Organisations) which was formed in May 1990. A group of ten to fifteen women came together as a result of a conference in March 1990. The conference and an exhibition of art called 'Women as Subject and Object of Art' was organised by three women from Moscow. One of them, Natal'ia Philippova has become a leader of SAFO. The group issued a declaration



which describes the position of women in the USSR as one of discrimination and suggests ways of changing this predicament.<sup>6</sup>

The main activity of the group is consciousness-raising, based on the system of Re-evaluation Co-counselling advocated by the American Harvey Jackins. This is a form of person-to-person communication, aimed at bringing out human distress. It eventually helps individuals better to realise their creative and intellectual capacities. The basic idea of co-counselling is that every human being is genuinely talented and capable of being creative. However, in the course of growing up, behaviour patterns develop which are based on early distress and bad personal encounters. The group is gradually extending and new sections are being organised. There are women-only as well as mixed groups forming.

Another organisation was formed in the summer of 1990 as a result of an open seminar on 'Women in Politics and Policy for Women' which was held at the Centre for Gender Studies in Moscow. The Centre itself was founded in May 1990 under the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, with Anastasiia Posadskaia as Director. Women who attended the seminar decided to organise a movement called NEZHDI (*Nezavisimaia Zhenskaia Demokraticheskaia Initsiativa*, or the Independent Women's Democratic Initiative), an acronym also meaning 'do not wait'. NEZHDI was formed in the town of Naberezhnye Chelny since most of the participants at the seminar were from the Kamaz truck factory there. It currently deals with women's problems at work, such as defending them from unemployment and trying to change their hard working conditions. In addition, NEZHDI holds political seminars and discusses the position of women in Soviet society.<sup>7</sup>

'The New Feminist Forum – "Beauty will Save the World"' is another organisation. Its fifteen members are located in six cities of Russia. Their leader, Nikolai Rogozhin, lives in Sochi. While calling themselves feminists, they seek harmony and salvation of the world in the maternal ideal of a woman. It is an idea about matriarchy. Their ideological point is that women are closer to nature and essentially 'better' than men, so they should rule the world. The general idea is that men destroyed the world, and women will save it.<sup>8</sup>

Another initiative of a similar sort is the idea of 'breeding' a woman president, expressed by a man named M. Pilshikov. A group of people, mostly men, calling themselves 'Coordinating Centre for the Defence of Women's Rights in Social and Political Activity' are working on a project to train women to assume high positions in the institutions of power.<sup>9</sup>



So far, these are the only organisations whose members consider themselves feminist. But this increase in women's activity all around the country gives one hope that women are ready to start a women's movement, defending their rights as women, seeking real equality with men.<sup>10</sup>

A recent event, the First Independent Women's Forum, which took place in the town of Dubna from 29–31 March 1991, proves that the process of consciousness-raising in Russia has begun. Discussions on many political, social, cultural and economic issues were based on feminist theory. Some basic feminist issues were raised, such as violence against women, rape, discrimination against women in professional and in political spheres and gender-role stereotypes in family life.

### Conclusion

A feminist movement has not yet started in the USSR. It is difficult to predict when it will and from what base. Politically and sociologically, the soul is ready to accept grains of a women's movement. There is enough dissatisfaction among women with their lives and their place in society. But there is not enough recognition of discrimination against women in society as a whole and among women in particular. Speaking in feminist terms, one could say that there is no sisterhood yet. Compared to Western history of the last wave of the Women's Liberation movement, Soviet reality lacks a so-called 'civil society' – a society that consists of rather independent individuals, who are aware of their individual rights, who are familiar with the legal and political concepts and structures of democracy and who are capable of organising themselves. So women's liberation in the West enjoyed a much more suitable and propitious starting point. For a large-scale and mass Soviet women's movement to start, some kind of impetus, or a stimulus is needed. It might be an anti-abortion campaign or a law that would seriously affect women's position, leading to an obvious deterioration for the majority of women. Something like that is already happening in Poland, Czechoslovakia and possibly in other East European countries. In the Soviet Union, the Orthodox Church, which is gradually gaining power, has not yet succeeded in its goal of implanting conservative values in society.

Another relevant point is the sheer ignorance about feminist issues and movements. Not one feminist book or piece of serious feminist research has been published in the USSR. Only recently, beginning in 1989, a small number of feminist articles appeared in the Soviet press,



mostly in specialised sociological and political journals. Alongside the lack of information about feminism, a huge number of sex and erotica newspapers (dozens of them appearing new every month) popularise and extend the traditional masculinist view on women. The popular image of woman now is either a beautiful sex-object, or a rather unpleasant, 'overemancipated' 'Soviet-type' shrew. The voice of feminism is still unheard by the majority, but the message of its opponents is clear – women should know their place. Feminism, then, is not tainted by Western images. Few women have any notion of real liberation. And ideas about 'emancipation' are associated with the state and its coercive power.

Nevertheless, the reality, the everyday ordeal of Soviet women confronted with economic difficulties and with an image of pretty doll or a happy housewife, cannot but leave them confused. How can she combine her reality with this sweet dream of 'real femininity', or 'purely womanly mission'? Since there is not a real answer to this paradox, feminist developments are unavoidable. The only question is, how?

In many ways, women's problems are at the heart of a changing political and social culture of the USSR. Referring here to the specifics of Russian culture, the traditions of patriarchy, we now observe the emergence of so-called 'male democracy', in which women, long associated with the home, are simply not seen in this newly emerging civil society. On the other hand, at least some of the economic independence gained by Soviet women under socialism cannot be dismissed so easily. It is hard to imagine Soviet women gladly shedding their independent economic status. The emergence of so many women's enterprises and women's organisations based mostly on the real need to survive in a market economy, is obvious proof of that. Soviet sisters just need to keep, to maintain and to improve their economic position. But the strong myth of Mother Russia will keep Soviet women attached to the family. This is a very serious part of Russian culture – communal activity and community ties are very strong. And, despite the fact that the divorce rate is increasing due to understandable dissatisfaction on the part of women (two-thirds of divorces are initiated by women), the importance of the private sphere is still there. This means that most feminist activity and the development of feminist ideas will be located in the family. There will be much less emphasis than in the West on separatism and division between the sexes, much more desire to find compromises in the realm of family life.

This does not necessarily mean that women will have less to say in political and social spheres, only that their active participation in those



areas will probably have to wait. It will be delayed for the time needed to recognise that nobody, except women, can solve their own problems. These problems have yet to be named. In this respect, Soviet feminists will definitely need to draw on the experience, terminology and knowledge of their Western sisters. We do not need to 'reinvent the wheel' since there are universal women's issues, global problems shared by us all, such as reproductive rights, sexual violence, sexual harassment, professional discrimination and the masculinist tradition of objectifying women – all these expressions, terms and problems will have to find names and solutions in Soviet society.

## NOTES

- 1 As described by VERA's president, N. Andreeva, at the First Independent Women's Forum, Dubna, March 29–31 1991.
- 2 *Programma Edinoi Partii Zhenshchin* (Leningrad, July 1990).
- 3 Speech of the party leader, Tat'iana Frolova, at the First Independent Women's Forum, Dubna, 30 March 1991.
- 4 Interview with Leningrad journalist, Tat'iana Zazorina, a member of the 'Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Military', April 1991.
- 5 Speech of E. Miasnikova at the First Independent Women's Forum, Dubna, 30 March 1991.
- 6 *SAFO Declaration* (May 1990).
- 7 *Occasional Newsletter*, no. 1 (Moscow Centre for Gender Studies, September 1990).
- 8 Speech of Nikolai Rogozhin at the First Independent Women's Forum, Dubna, 29 March 1991.
- 9 *Pravda*, 9 December 1990.
- 10 A 'samizdat' magazine *Zhenskoe Chtenie* (Women's Reading) has been published since the beginning of 1988. Ol'ga Lipovskaia is the main journalist and translator. The magazine, so far, has six issues with between thirty and forty copies of each. Each edition has about 100–140 pages of typewritten text. It declares itself to be feminist. Part of *Zhenskoe Chtenie* consists of translations of extracts of Western feminism. It also publishes articles on women's issues in the USSR. Another part covers women's literature – poetry and prose by unknown and unofficial women-writers. There are also sections on 'Women in History', 'Documents' and 'Humour'. Now the magazine is going to be published on a more professional scale with a much larger circulation of 5,000 to 10,000.