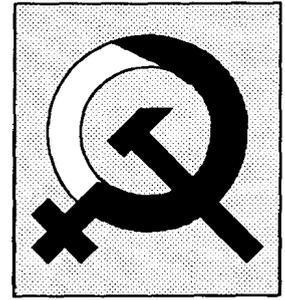

PERESTOIKA, GLASNOST AND WOMEN



Effects of Perestroika and Glasnost on Women

BY KERRY MCCUAIG

Glasnost is supposed to be the perfect ad word. It's easily adaptable and has many meanings — openness, transparency, truth. During a fact-finding tour of the Soviet Union last July, I discovered an additional interpretation — *glasnost* means always having to say you're sorry.

And when it comes to women, the Soviets are doing a lot of apologizing. *Glasnost* has resulted in the recognition that there is a "women's question" in the Soviet Union — an issue the book had been largely closed on since the late 1920s. It re-opened with a vengeance at the June 1988 Party Conference. In a remarkably critical and frank report, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev called the status of women in Soviet society a matter of "state importance."

"It has often been asserted that this question has been resolved in this country once and for all," Gorbachev said. "Indeed, we proclaimed equal rights for women and men, gave women equal access to nearly all trades and professions, fixed equal pay for equal work, and guaranteed other rights for women. This is all very well. But it turned out that, apart from the undeniable gains, there are still daily cares largely preventing women from enjoying their rights fully."

Soviet society can list some very real accomplishments regarding women. Equality legislation exists which is the envy of the world's women. In 70 years, a backward feudal state, with an intervening history which can only be described as tragic, has eradicated illiteracy, produced the largest number of women professionals and specialists on the globe and has 90 percent of its female population engaged in productive labour. It can claim many "firsts," from the first woman ambassador to the first woman in space — but complete equality...?

It was Gorbachev who caused the warning antennae to go up concerning the impact of *glasnost* and economic restructuring (*perestroika*) on women. It was in his book, *Perestroika*, in a

short section on women and the family, that he alluded to "returning women to their womanly mission" as "keepers of the family."

This has been interpreted as a backward statement coming from an otherwise forward-thinking individual. But in fact, the Soviet leader was reflecting a view widely held in his society — one advanced by both men and women.

Why would women who had successfully made such enormous leaps be prepared to trade it all for Lenin's dire description of the "mind-numbing stultification of the kitchen and nursery?" Probably because they never actually got around to leaving the dishes and diapers behind.

If Gorbachev's comments fall on fertile ground it's because, as much as in North America, Soviet women shoulder the double burden of work and family. In addition they have a longer work week, spend more time in shopping queues (up to three hours a day!), and do not have access to the broad range of household services that can be purchased in urban centres here — some of the deficiencies *perestroika* is trying to address.

Little wonder that Soviet newspapers are full of letters from women who are exhausted from "having it all." Some would even prefer not to work outside the home if their husbands earned sufficient income.

A recent survey, widely published in Soviet journals, found that a woman with young children has seven hours and 36 minutes a day for herself — this includes the time she is supposed to sleep. After paid employment and domestic chores end, there is 17 minutes a day for family "quality time."

Men and their responsibilities in the family have been largely left out of any public examination of the double burden. There has been no feminist movement to articulate the injustices and challenge male privilege. This was due to the Stalinist assumption that a socialist economy would solve the women's question — steadily improving living standards, legal protection and

social amenities would bring equality between the sexes. There were many improvements but stagnation (1970-mid 1980s) brought setbacks.

Gorbachev addressed this development at the Party conference. He noted how much money for social needs was allocated only after all other spending commitments had been met:

This situation could exist for years because women's opinions were not duly reckoned with. Women are not duly represented in government bodies. And the women's movement as a whole which gained momentum after the October Revolution, has gradually come to a standstill and become formal.

Soviet society is paying a high price for this process. Women are so overextended that it has become obvious in all other parts of their lives — at work, with their families, and in “civic” life. The crisis in family life is a widely debated issue. The average Soviet marries young (before 25), and one out of three is divorced by 30. Over 80 percent of these women never remarry — compared to 85 percent of divorced women in North America who do.

Over a million women endure the stress of single parenting. Day care is expansive, catering to 17 million pre-school children, but spaces are in short supply in rural areas and new housing developments, and the Soviets speak of a pressing need to upgrade existing facilities. Toddlers are in care for up to 14 hours a day. For older children, there's the latch key solution — which is utilized of course even by two parent families. The lack of “maternal involvement” has been held responsible for growing juvenile delinquency.

Then there is the inevitable abuse which occurs when people live in over-crowded conditions and are stretched to the limit. Today there are more children in the care of the state than there were following the second world war and the standard of care for these children is a self-proclaimed national scandal.

Glasnost means that for the first time in five decades such conditions are being recognized openly, and public debate is a first step in finding solutions. *Perestroika* is designed to kick-start the economy into addressing the shortages of goods and

services — but this is a long-term process and not without contradictions.

Where elements of *perestroika* are tough, it is necessary to appreciate how desperate the economic situation has become. There has been no real economic growth in five years; some studies point to negative growth. Shortages are rampant even in survival products. The housing crisis has actually worsened, as units built in past generations begin to fall apart. The economy is on the verge of collapse with little room to manoeuvre.

Perestroika means giving the most oppressed group of women — mothers with young children — more time. New legislation enacted a year ago and written by the Soviet Women's Committee (a body comparable to the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, but with more clout), extends maternity leave from one to two years and doubles job security to three years. Mothers with children under eight can have their jobs modified to part time, or can go on flex time.

There is also popular discussion whether appropriate steps should be taken to allow women the choice of remaining in the workforce or becoming full-time housewives. This question of choice raises difficult questions for Marxists: should a socialist state enact policy to enable women to become full-time homemakers? Classically, the emancipation of women is dependent upon their integration into productive labour. Practically, a full-time housewife and children would require the introduction of a “male wage” — an income large enough to support a family. The consequences of a “bread winner” in society is evident — we live it here: women as “secondary” earners become secondary in all other aspects.

Even if the state, through a sizeable family allowance, facilitates women staying at home, the Soviet economy can not compensate the loss of one full-time wage. And what of single mothers? Women in capitalist societies are well-versed in the problems of the welfare system.

As other socialist countries (Poland, Hungary) have found, an extension of maternity leave has the side effect of greatly reducing demand, and therefore availability, of group infant care. In the end women do not have a choice about whether to stay home with their young children. Extended maternity leave is also

a means of hiding unemployment. Further, greatly extended maternity leave is associated with women losing ground in the professions; a failure to take on-the-job upgrading; and a re-enforcement of defined sex roles in the family — a situation the Hungarian Women's Council argues against very eloquently.

Movement towards a full-time housewife category in the age of *perestroika* also raises questions about timing. Economic restructuring involves the displacement of millions of workers. An estimated six million women will be released from their jobs in industry and agriculture alone. The government is committed to a massive retraining and relocation program, but the ensuing problems will be enormous.

The social impact of such a transition could be softened if a readily available alternative could be found — and for married women the home is a viable option. If a whole ideological rationale is developed on the social importance of that “purely womanly mission,” the transition could take place relatively smoothly.

This is not to suggest that Soviet policy makers have consciously adopted this stand. The motivation behind such initiatives can be appreciated. But since it takes more than women to create children, it should involve more than women raising them. These policies don't address the sexual division of labour. They don't address the fact that women do two to two and a half times more domestic labour than men, nor that men have three hours a day more leisure time than women.

Popular debates avoid such questions. But another, albeit smaller, voice is emerging. It was heard at last June's conference in the address by Zoya Pukhova, head of the Soviet Women's Committee. “It has become customary to connect home, family and the education of children only with women... and to therefore blame them for many of our social problems,” she told delegates. “Yes, the role of mothers is important, but the responsibility of fathers is equal. We should raise the prestige of fatherhood and the family as a whole. We should widen the system of social and economic guarantees to the family... who should decide how to best use them.”

Pukhova also took a swing at some aspects of economic restructuring which she said is excluding women from higher

paying and more skilled work, or displacing them from their jobs.

The evidence is there to back her concerns. Cutting down on the stifling 18-million member bureaucracy is an essential part of addressing the Soviet economic crisis. But initial studies find departments are laying off their support staff — women — while the real offenders remain.

Co-ops are viewed as another part of the solution, both in providing needed services and allowing women flexibility in their work day. But co-op members are working 10-12 hours a day, thereby excluding women with children, except through homework.

Work brigades, introduced as an incentive to productive workers by offering higher wages and benefits for increased efficiency, are another feature of *perestroika*. But crack brigades naturally want the most productive workers — leaving women, disabled and older workers on the sidelines.

Another trend finds that when women with small children try to take advantage of their legal right to shorter hours or flex time, employers and work teams are re-

luctant to accommodate their requests. These women often find themselves classified as slackers and under pressure to quit.

Cost accounting — where enterprises are expected to be self-sufficient, self-financing, and provide social services to their members — may bring substantial benefits for workers in the profitable resource and heavy industry sectors. It is unlikely to be as successful in low profit sectors such as the textile and garment industries where women predominate.

Little wonder Pukhova is concerned about a widening wage gap. But cost accounting is also likely to result in two and three tier levels of social services. This system is also being considered for education, health and other social services. Such a development can only take place if user fees are charged — as is now happening on a small scale.

Despite the drawbacks Soviet women still view *perestroika* as being in their best long term interests. The elimination of the bureaucracy, coupled with increased productivity, wages, and services contains the hope of lightening the oppressive load they shoulder.

But even a socialist market needs some state interference to act as a buffer for the most vulnerable members of the workforce. What form this takes — and how effective it is — depends very much on input from the affected groups. Here *glasnost* has given women a bad deal.

Glasnost, with its accompanying “openness” in the arts and culture, has been accompanied by male flirtation with soft pornography — the appearance of Soviet film stars in *Penthouse*, the exploitative use of women’s bodies in film and advertising, and the embarrassing charade of the All-Union Beauty Contest.

It is a situation the Soviet Women’s Committee seems ill-equipped to deal with. After 50 years of decreeing public opinion, its leaders admit the difficulty of entering into an ideological debate with society on women’s equality issues.

The negative side of *glasnost* was also seen in the June 1989 elections. While the most free in the Soviet Union’s history, they produced a People’s Congress where less than 15 percent of the deputies are women. In past governments, quota systems necessitated at least a 33 percent representation from women.



Commenting on the election results one Moscow journalist gave these grim predictions: "The election campaign confirmed that the country's policy, essentially, is shaped without women's participation. Therefore, it is hardly possible to forecast for the near future an increase in the influence of women deputies in shaping... a policy corresponding to the ideals of socialism, in settling the 'women's question,' that would seek not only for women to perform a reproductive function, but also seek their equal participation in managing all the fields of state and public life in our country."

The election outcome also exposes the weaknesses of plans to develop a grass roots women's movement, through the establishment of local women's councils. It was Gorbachev who called for the councils to be formed, and called on the Party at last year's important June conference to ensure "the door to be open wide for them to governing bodies at all levels, and that questions directly concerning women's interests not be solved without their participation and decisive judgement."

But if these formal arrangements haven't taken off there are spontaneous groups emerging, intent on launching an ideological challenge against women's place in Soviet society.

One such group is the recently formed LOTOS, the League for Society's Liberation from Stereotypes. The brain child of a group of Moscow scholars, it holds lectures and small group discussions inviting women to question: "why is society unfair to them? How long will women go on being regarded as second rate citizens?" Still, LOTOS member Olga Voronina ruefully recognizes that the western women's movement has a twenty year head start on them.

But regardless of the outcome, the situation of Soviet women requires some examination by Canadian socialists and challenges some of our own strategies for achieving equality. For example, the agenda of reforms advanced by the women's movement in Canada, while quite far-reaching and in some respects a direct challenge to capitalism, is largely in place in Soviet society, but it has not resulted in equality — even within a socialist system.

The question of the double burden remains regardless of how it is shared. Have we underestimated the social, economic and time pressures of child rearing? Does the current level of economic development, either here or in the Soviet Union, make it feasible to advance realistically the socialization of child care or the industrialization of the household as a solution

within the realizable future?

In our demand for an equal division of labour in the family, have we underestimated the pressures of job success and how this impacts on the economic well being of the family?

Don't we need to take another look at the nuclear family as the basic societal unit? A number of socialists in Canada have stressed the advantages of the extended family or modified family forms, such as communal households, but women in many societies, including many Soviets, now live in an extended family situation. What can we learn from this?

How do socialist governments respond to popular demands? If masses of women are pressing for the "choice" of full-time child rearing, should the option not be made available?

I don't presume to have the answers to these questions; hopefully they can form the basis for an ongoing debate in the Canadian women's movement.

Kerry McCuaig is a journalist on staff with The Canadian Tribune. She writes and lectures extensively on women's issues. Over the past ten years she has travelled to both the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to study the situation of women living under socialism.

Hostel Women

J. DIDIER-KING

She used to fit
inside of him.
Curved 'round knuckles,
the back of his hand.

And they'd walk
around (or under things)
spray painting words
on rock walls.

Dancing
beneath skin.

She knows of things
harder than this.

How hands get
cold in pockets.

How they snap
against the cheek.

And how it's easy
to speak of hiding.
Losing yourself
in the underside.

This is the third move
she's made. Sleeping
in rooms with other women,
their broken noses, bruised minds.

But she is safer now.
Her blanket
soft as the lining
in a pocket. And

at night her room fills
with life sounds.
The sounds
of women breathing.

Drunken Praise

J. DIDIER-KING

Your actions speak
the drunken praise
of true spirit.

(distilled fluid,
mashed grain)

I'd prefer
you'd remember
touching me.

Hands touch other
hands. Reach
for things,
like feet
under a table.