# Soviet Women — A Canadian View

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*Glasnost*, or openness, in discussing problems in the Soviet Union has allowed women to speak out about the difficulties they face. Women's issues are described with a frankness rarely seen in the western media, and despite the serious economic crisis, increasing social benefits for women is under discussion. However, how the "woman question" is addressed in the Soviet Union sounds very foreign to our ears. Women, we were told, already have emancipation. Now they need to be less tired. Over and over again, in the interviews we did, in the media, and in scholarly articles, the same analysis is put forward: the problem for women is that they are "over-emancipated." Women have "too much equality."

It's clear that their idea of emancipation is very different from ours. For Canadian socialist feminists, emancipation involves equality in all spheres of life. We contend that it is not biological sex differences, but the social construction of certain biological facts into gender differences that is at the root of sexism.

The Soviet view is described by Svetlana Kaidash: "If she's saddled with a job, the children, the housekeeping, it's because she's emancipated, so let her pay for it."[1] Zoya Boguslavskaya, a Soviet novelist asks, "could it not be that our women have too many rights at times? Can't women do without some of them today? And is it not time to exchange some of these rights for others?"[2]

While our socialist feminist notions of equality are based on the common humanity of men and women and their common potential to love, nurture, make peace as well as war,[3] Soviet views assume women and men have quite different natures.[4] Kaidash, for example, believes that "to solve the women's problem, it would be more to the point to speak not about equality but about the peculiarity and indispensability of each sex; about the possibility of harmonious existence."[5]

What follows from this view of equality can be quite troublesome. The idea of emancipation involves a respect for position, quite removed from political content. Women with high status in any sphere are admired, regardless of their practice which could be anti-woman and reactionary. *Moscow News* reported that 200,000 Soviet citizens voted to name British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher "Woman of the Year."[6] Tatyana Korolyova comments:

> *Margaret Thatcher deserves to be Woman of the year. She shows that a woman can be just as prominent a politician as a man. In our country I don't know any women politicians. Maybe Zaslavskaya could become one.*[7]

This view was echoed over and over again. At the same time, the concept of women and men having different natures fosters a celebration of femininity as pretty and weak. Valeria Kalmyk, Vice-President of the Soviet Women's Committee, informed us that although her position requires her to be strong at work, she likes to be "weak" at home. Her husband likes it that way. This is also found in the new support for beauty contests.[8] A lead article in *Moscow News* assessing the important changes in four years of *perestroika* applauds the advent of beauty contests as an important step forward.[9]

The ideal woman is also married and a mother. At *Krestyanka* (The Peasant Woman), a popular monthly women's magazine (circulation: 19 million), the editors explained to us:

> *for our women, when they see happiness, they see it through their family life. The most successful career woman, without a happy family life, is not considered by society to be a complete woman.*

Thus, current debates about women's problems are predicated on assumptions that women and men have different natures, have different social responsibilities, and that these should be complementary. They are framed by concerns about "over-emancipation." They raise questions about a wide range of specific issues. We will give examples of how Soviet policies framed by such a philosophy affect women in four areas — employment, in care for children, and marriage and housework.

**Paid Employment and Health and Safety**

A major priority of the Soviet government since its beginning has been the full employment of women. Politically motivated initially by the belief that integrating women into full employment was essential for women's emancipation, this effort has been reinforced by an on-going need for women's labour.

However, to protect women, 460 occupations are now prohibited to them and there are plans to increase this by 600.[10] The women's councils, found in villages, workplaces, and Soviets, support such legislation and further try to persuade all women, but especially pregnant or old women, not to take these jobs. Although legally prohibited, women are reluctant to sacrifice the pay and benefits in this kind of work because when conditions of work are identified as hazardous, the pay is high.

Many Soviets are troubled by the fact that, despite such legislation, women are employed in heavy manual labour, and note that when technology is introduced to make work less arduous, men often benefit. Boguslavskaya calls it a "national disgrace to see women shovelling asphalt on the road with a spade and a man sitting and operating a steamroller to level this asphalt."[11] In agriculture women do extremely heavy work, while men move into the newly mechanized jobs.[12]

For us such protective legislation for women is problematic. Excluding women from any job perpetuates gender divisions which then reinforce the structures that result in women's job ghettos. If work is dangerous or unhealthy or too arduous for women we argue, then it is for men as well.

The way the law now operates, certain occupations (such as textiles, or agriculture) which are seen as particularly suited to women, are also noted for poor and unhealthy conditions. Gail Lapidus comments that although high infant mortality rates are a cause for concern:

> *protective measures are more likely to reflect traditional stereotypes about "male" and "female" work than a scientifically grounded recognition of occupational hazards engendered by new technologies.*

Thus most of the discussion revolves around "due consideration of the specific features of the female organism." In one rather unusual exception, a Soviet author comments on another approach to this problem:

> *Of course, arduous and harmful jobs are detrimental to any organism, female as well as male, and therefore the prime objective aimed at making work for women easier and less hazardous to health, should not be the replacement of women by men but the complete elimination of such jobs and types of production, especially their restructuring and the radical improvement of working conditions.*[13]

## Care for Children

Culturally, children are highly valued, perhaps especially so by the generation devastated by the Great Patriotic War. We


were repeatedly impressed by the obvious respect and care accorded children. Most women say they want to have children and official government policy promotes an increase in the birth rate in Russia and the Baltic republics where the average is now about one child per woman.[14] Social conditions make child bearing and rearing difficult, and these are seen as "women's problems."

We asked Nellie Kiryak, the head of the women's councils in Moldavia why benefits for families with young children were offered only to women. She replied:

> *The law doesn't forbid parents to decide who is going to take the maternity leave but by tradition it is almost 100% the woman who takes the right. For sick leave, the practice is both the mother and the father. As for maternity leave, even for myself, I am "backward." I would never let my husband stay with the child when he was very small because men are not biologically used to raising small children as well as mothers can. Probably this is tradition, probably this is our opinion, but it's difficult to find a woman who does not prefer it this way.*

On paper, there are a range of social services guaranteed to mothers and children which go far beyond anything Canadian feminists have ever dreamed of. Since the early 1980s, women can remain out of the workforce with a small monthly allowance for eighteen months after the birth of a child. Increasing this to a three year period is now under discussion.

However, because the social service sector is so underdeveloped, facilities and services are often unsatisfactory. For example, preschoolers are entitled to be looked after in nurseries until they are three years of age, and kindergarten until they are seven. These centres are available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and fees are very low so everyone can afford them. Availability, especially in good places, is a problem. Quality varies widely, the ratio of children to staff is very high and training of staff is poor; so is the pay. Centres are frequently located in places far from home and workplace.

## Marriage

Svetlana Markovich is the organizer and head of the Family and Marriage consulting service, one of the first of its kind in the country. She is also a deputy of the district Soviet, where she is head of the department that deals with problems of family and marriage. This counselling service is specifically geared to helping couples with the psychological aspects of sterility, preventing divorce, and convincing people to have more children. (Three children, we were told, is the number doctors maintain to be scientifically desirable).

The counselling against divorce necessarily focuses on the woman as most divorces (70%) are initiated by women. This involves convincing the woman to be patient, especially during the early years, and to respect the other's needs. Svetlana Markovich felt that in the past the mistake of the education system was to treat both sexes the same. What resulted was the "masculinization" of girls and the "feminization" of boys. Girls should be prepared for their roles as wife and mother, while boys should be taught to take responsibility, to help the wife. When boys and girls are treated equally, girls lose their femininity. How can she play football, and still expect a man to help her? She needs to be taught to be careful, not to lift heavy things because there will come a time when she will have a baby.

## Housework

It is now generally acknowledged that Soviet women have too much to do. Two hundred and seventy-five billion hours

(equal to 90% of the time spent on paid work in the national economy as a whole) are spent on work in the home each year.[15] *Moscow News* published a study calculating that a woman purchases 2.4 tons of food a year for her family of four, and her work around the house covers 12-13 kilometres a day. Estimates on the time spent on shopping (looking for purchases and standing in queues) rose to 37,000 million hours.[16]

Kalmyk, from the Soviet Women's Committee, described the complexity of these problems:

> *...you can tell us why we have such long lines near the shops and why it takes women a lot of time to buy the most necessary things. We are not satisfied with the way our public services function... such as dry cleaners, shoe makers and laundry. We are dissatisfied with the level of our household gadgets. If we are able to solve these problems, then it would give women a lot of time that she might spend on herself, on bringing up children and her education. ...these problems can't be solved by themselves because they are connected with the general social and economic development of the country...*

### Dilemmas for Women: Keeping Women in their Natural Places?

Thus, the women's councils, women's magazines, the trade unions, the Soviet Women's Committee — indeed everyone we spoke with — regards finding some way of easing women's "double burden" as very important. The measures proposed, however, are all designed to keep women in harness — married and primarily responsible for the children.

Workers at work experience *perestroika* (restructuring) as growing pressure at work — the results have still not been seen in increased availability of consumer products. The inadequacies and contradictions in present policy become all too apparent when looking at policies regarding women. Solutions based on capitalist, male models of intensifying labour, using the threat of unemployment to motivate workers and linking wages to productivity at work have serious drawbacks. In our society, they have clearly contributed to the continuing discrepancies between male and female earnings.

The editors of *Rabotnitsa* (The Woman Worker) explained the situation to us like this:

> *The simple idea is to have less personnel who will be more highly qualified in order to get the same job done more efficiently. That way the workers would get more. We have such a shortage of labour that it will take some time, but after that, what will happen? Who will be first to be fired or be sent away? Those who have children or poor health and things like that. And especially those who have children, would be the first candidates to be fired, and that would be absolutely unfair.*

The separation of women into workers and homemakers, while officially not holding men responsible for the maintenance of social life, has led to contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, there is official recognition of the desirability of promoting women to administrative posts, and concern raised in the press about women's under-representation in important positions. On the other hand, despite the high rate of alcoholism (a primarily male problem), it is women who officially bear the moral burden for the breakdown of family life. Provisions such as increased

***The Woman Delegate*, 1927, oil on canvas, by Georgi Ryazhsky**

childcare leaves, part-time work, and shorter work days, when applied only to women, offer short-term relief. However, our Canadian experience has been that the result of this relief will likely be to perpetuate the division of labour which led to women's heavy workload in the first place.

Western feminism is not well known or understood in the Soviet Union. To the extent it is, it is usually identified with either liberal or radical feminism. Thus, western feminism appears irrelevant to Soviet women. It seems to embody demands for legal changes long enshrined in Soviet law, such as access to abortion, and/or hostility to men. The Soviet women we met who were highly educated professionals had little knowledge of the fundamental concerns of western feminism. Our commitment to gender analysis and the question of sex/gender differences, our concerns about access to *real* social power and the importance of redefining work to include household and child-rearing, were not issues they could relate to. We thought they were far too soft on their men.

If women, either in North America or in the Soviet Union, are to change their lives, it is first of all necessary to get rid of notions which limit the possibilities for real emancipation. A gender analysis means understanding the absence of women in positions of power, and the heavy workload of women, as part of the ubiquity of gender hierarchy in every social sphere. The separation between waged work and personal life, with the latter assigned to women's sphere, is not natural. The definition of work expectations that preclude consideration of responsibilities for both sexes outside work is not necessary.

[1]*Moscow News*, (no. 33, 1988).

[2]See Zoya Boguslavskaya, "What Kind of Woman is the Modern Woman," in *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 10, no. 4, (Toronto, 1989), p. 59.

[3]For example see Lynn Segal, *Is the Future Feminine?* London: Verso, 1988, Sheila Rowbotham, *Women's Consciousness, Men's World*, London: 1973, Penguin, Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983, Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton, *Feminism and Political Economy*, Toronto: Methuen, 1987.

[4]There is, of course, a stream of western feminism, that also theorizes differences between the sexes. A radical feminist view would accept existing views on male and female qualities, but assign different values to these qualities. Some liberal feminists identify different male and female natures which are complementary.

[5]*Moscow News*, (no. 33, 1988).

[6]*Moscow News*, (no. 13, 1989).

[7]*Moscow News*, (no. 15, 1989).

[8]*Soviet Union*, (April, 1989).

[9]*Moscow News*, (no. 21, 1989).

[10]Vera Tolkunova, "The Working Woman in the USSR," in *Women in the USSR* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985).

[11]*op. cit.*, Boguslavskaya, p. 60.

[12]M. Federova, "The Utilization of Female Labor in Agriculture," in Gail Lapidus, *Women, Work and Family in the Soviet Union*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1982).

[13]L. Rzhanitsyna, "Current Problems of Female Labor in the USSR" in Gail Lapidus, 1982.

[14]Interview with Svetlana Markovich, Moscow, 1989.

[15]Maslova and Novikova, "Give the Lady a Hand."

[16]"Pravda" (June 9, 1984) in Angus Roxburgh, *Pravda* (New York, 1987).

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