# Sex Role Education in the USSR

BY LANDON PEARSON

In the spring of 1989 I sat down at their teacher's desk in a typical Moscow classroom. In front of me were thirty fifteen-year-olds, boys and girls together. They were fresh-faced and remarkably attractive, uniformed, of course, but casually: the girls in navy-blue suits, the boys in jackets and pants. These were the same children I watched entering school for the first time in 1981 as I stood at the window of the Canadian Embassy across the street. They were now in the eighth class with two more to go before graduation. I had come to talk to them about their future.

First, I asked them what they wanted to do with their lives. The boys were far more ambitious than the girls. The girls took it for granted that they would have to work but they had limited ideas about what they might be doing. Yulya thought that she would like to be a doctor, but medicine in the USSR is a profession that has long been dominated by women (except for specialists and senior administrators) so there was nothing unusual in that. The others saw themselves possibly as teachers, or more likely as office or factory workers, or in the service sector. Although the excitement of the first open election to the Congress of People's Deputies was still in the air, none of the girls expressed the slightest interest in politics or in power.

Then I asked them about their future family lives. Did they expect to be married? All the girls said "yes" and then laughed when some of the boys said "no." These boys and girls were quite comfortable with one another because most of them had been together since the age of seven. "How many children?" I asked. "Two," came the prompt reply, one girl commenting wistfully that it had not been much fun being an only child. "And if you are able to make a choice between staying at home with your children and going to work," I addressed the girls specifically, "What will you do?" The reply was unanimous. "Stay at home. It's too difficult to do both."

I found what the girls said to be disappointing, yet it confirmed what I had observed during the years I lived in the Soviet Union and, during subsequent visits. It is clear that social attitudes change very slowly, even when a country is in political turmoil. So, in spite of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the overwhelming message about gender in the Soviet Union remains that boys should

Oktyabr collective-farm kindergarten in Dunganovka Village, Kazakhstan *courtesy* NOVOSTI PRESS AGENCY

be boys, girls should be girls, and that social behaviours that distinguish one sex from the other should not be confused.

Although the Revolution was supposed to free women from the domination of men and make them legally and economically equal to them, it did very little to change basic stereotypes of what boys and girls should be like. Nor has there been much change since. The persistence of these stereotypes is partly a function of the tragedies of Soviet history, such as the devastating demographic impact of the Second World War. Yet these tragedies are now in the past, and boys and girls are still receiving the same message from the school system; that the two sexes have different roles to play in maintaining the fabric of Soviet society, roles that burden Soviet women with the familiar "second shift." Not only are Soviet women expected to work outside the home and play their characteristic female role nurturing the emotional quality of the work collective but, they are also expected to be in charge of all the "comforts" of domestic life. No wonder the girls, who, no doubt, sympathized with their exhausted mothers, told me that they would opt to remain at home with their babies if they could. The discouraging thing is that, even in 1989, they were unable to imagine an alternative that would allow them to enjoy both careers and children.

The problem, of course, is that Soviet boys are not learning to share the domestic burden as a matter of course. That might be "unmanly." There has been a great deal of public concern expressed in the Soviet Union in recent years that boys are being "feminized" by the blurring of family roles and by the erosion of distinctions between men and women; by confusion in the "genotypes," as I heard one commentator express it. As a consequence, the school system is being encouraged by various authorities to reinforce differences between boys and girls. This is a social, not an intellectual, charge. Except for the course in "The Ethics and Psychology of Family Life" (which I will describe later) there is little in the Soviet curriculum that actively discriminates between the sexes. Soviet girls study the same math and sciences as Soviet boys and are rewarded for doing well, just as boys are. Nor are the textbooks particularly at fault, although more mothers are shown on tractors than fathers at the kitchen stove. The social structure of the school, on the other hand, is constantly communicating sex-role stereotypes.

First of all, almost all the teachers, especially in the elementary grades, are women, whom I often observed, as the children must, deferring to their male colleagues. Then there are the uniforms. Little girls wear brown serge dresses with pinafores, black for ordinary days, white for special ones when they are also expected to put on white lace collars and cuffs. Almost all of them have their hair decorated with large white taffeta bows. By the time the girls are in the eighth class and are permitted (only since the early 1980s) to wear navy blue suits and blouses, a pattern of "feminine" appearance has been well-established. Boys wear long pants from the time they enter school and vaguely military jackets whose sleeves are sewn with insignia.

Labour education is an increasingly important aspect of Soviet school life but, as I saw for myself, the domestic science rooms are full of girls and the shops, of boys. It's not that there is overt discrimination with respect to the types of employment open to men and women (although women are now "excused" from a large number of jobs in certain industries that use toxic materials or heavy equipment for fear of harming their reproductive capacities), but it was quite clear to me that girls are not being encouraged to take up vocations or professions with the idea of rising to the top. Even though girls are often better qualified than boys when they leave school, they seldom rise above middle management when they go to work. This is because, in most cases, they have been socialized to subordinate their careers to the demands of domestic life. When I pointed out to senior members of the Soviet Women's Committee (who used to lecture me on the advantages of the Soviet system for women) the fact that the international "face" of the Soviet Union is entirely male, they would reply that no woman would want to be an ambassador at the cost of domestic happiness. Since they could not envisage any self-respecting male supporting his wife in such a role, they dismissed the entire idea.

This is a good example of the negative effects of persistent sex-typing. If playing a supportive role is only honoured when it is done by a woman, then no amount of legal and economic equality will make any difference. Little girls in the Soviet Union start off by believing that they are just as good as little boys in spite of the difference symbolized by their hairbows because, before puberty, they are not expected to be more supportive of boys than of other girls. In fact, a poll conducted in Moscow schools in the early 1980s indicated they expected boys to support them.[1] The little boys surveyed indicated that their ideal female was a mother who worked less and was more often at home. But the little girls wanted "to do everything and know everything" and, from their point of view, the ideal male was the one who would help them get what they wanted.

But with the onset of adolescence, girls everywhere become more susceptible to social stereotypes and Soviet girls are no exception. The social sex-role stereotyping that permeates the school system begins to take its toll. Older girls responded to the poll I have just described quite differently. At fifteen their ideal male was a "knight" who would protect them.

According to Dr. Igor Kon, an acknowledged expert on sexuality and one of the Soviet Union's most distinguished social psychologists, sexuality during adolescence is more polarized than it is at any other period in our life-cycle. This means, he says, that attitudes that are reinforced at this time have a good chance of becoming set.[2] The students I spoke with in the spring of 1989 were right in the middle of their adolescence and, during the next two years, they were probably going to have all their stereotypes reinforced by participating in a compulsory course called "The Ethics and Psychology of Family Life."

This course was included in the school curriculum when the Soviet educational system was reformed in 1985. It consists of 34 class hours spread over two years and *all* Soviet students, from the Yuit (Inuit) in Kamchatka to the Latvians in Riga, have to take it. I have no quarrel with the basic concept of the course which was designed to address growing difficulties being experienced by families throughout the Soviet Union: the soaring divorce rate, the neglected children, all the other unhappy phenomena that seem inevitably to accompany industrialization and the breakdown of traditional social structures. In the early 1980s, the Soviet State became conscious that both production and reproduction were suffering from disruptions in family life; both educational and political authorities decided that a well-designed course in family-life education might help.

Nor do I have a problem with most of the content. The course was carefully constructed by educators and psycholo-

gists associated with two of the research institutes of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences: the Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology and the Institute for the Study of General Problems of Social Upbringing. These well-qualified experts combined scientific and medical data on human sexuality with psychological studies of human development and research into interpersonal relations. Sociological data were also taken note of and the whole was augmented by special insights into human relations garnered from Russian and European literature. My difficulty begins with the infusion of communist ideology and the unapologetic display of sex-role stereotyping. Overall, the course is strong on the human level (the nature of relationships, the importance of profound emotions, the need for people to care for one another) but seriously weakened by political rhetoric and by unrealistic expectations of male and female behaviour.

While sex-role stereotypes can be found throughout the course content there is one section that specifically describes Soviet ideals of masculinity and femininity; I will concentrate on that. In the first class hour devoted to this topic the teacher asks the students to present their views of the "ideal" man and the "ideal" woman. The likelihood is that they will respond much as the students I spoke with did. Then the teacher can remind the boys that it is their duty to preserve the virtue and honour of the girls. And she can remind both boys and girls alike about the special role a girl, with her distinctly "feminine" qualities, can play in maintaining a healthy climate in the collective.

Direct quotations from the text[3] should make Soviet distinctions between masculinity and femininity perfectly clear. The ideal male should be "industrious" and characterized by "moral purity (no lewd thoughts!), a sense of responsibility, honesty, cleverness, will-power, fairness, courage and decisiveness, decency and self-control, modesty, politeness, respect for women and girls, readiness to defend those weaker than himself, to stand up for the right cause." He should also be "chivalrous" (which is defined as the willingness of the male to take on the most difficult work). Pseudo-masculine qualities are listed as "arrogance, boastfulness, cynicism, nihilism, fashion-consciousness, rudeness,"[4] smoking, drinking, and using "unprintable" language.

Turning to the female, the text lists her ideal qualities as "kindness, friendliness, ability to understand another person, tenderness, sincerity, naturalness, truthfulness, modesty, cheerfulness, sense of duty, dignity, sensitivity, faithfulness, good homemaker, charm, ability to love, high morality, physical beauty." A false notion of femininity, however, leads to "following fashion senselessly, too much make-up, carelessness, parasitism, irresponsibility, arrogance, rudeness, bad language, use of alcohol and false forms of female self-assertiveness."[5]

It is hard for us to imagine a teacher actually conducting a classroom discussion using such terms but, judging by my own experience, most Soviet boys and girls are quite comfortable with these stereotypes. And this in spite of the fact that the stereotypes have come unstuck from social reality. History has not been kind to Soviet women. They have suffered incredible losses; husbands and lovers, fathers and sons, brothers and friends have all been taken away from them leaving them to take up their roles and perform their tasks. They also had to compete for the love and attention of the few who came back. Now, for the first time in two generations, the demographic situation has placed women of marriageable age in a position of choice. For every hundred boys born in 1960, only eighty-five girls were born in 1963, so it is now men who have to compete for women. But these days, many Soviet girls are better educated than the boys who want to marry them and the gap is widening. Over 54 percent of university students are female. The young men still have to go off for their military service for two years and the young women move ahead of them. Of all those with a professional education in 1985, 59 percent were women; only 41 percent were men. Young women also have wider cultural and social interests than their male contemporaries. They go to more theatres, concerts, museums, and take a larger part in various forms of community action than do their husbands and boyfriends. Many young wives complain that their husbands are boring.[6]

And yet, in spite of all this, young Soviet girls are still stamped, in school and out of it, with the persistent image of the ideal Soviet woman as the gentle, supportive companion of the active, vigorous Soviet male. Their consciousness has not caught up with what is happening to them in the real world. The messages they receive in the school environment with respect to their sex roles are only part of the problem, of course, but they are an important part and changes could begin there. Little girls start off well in the Soviet school. They learn that they will have the same legal and economic rights as the boys in their class when they grow up. But then the stereotypes close in, shutting them off from the vision of a society so arranged that women can have an equal chance to rise to positions of power without unacceptable personal costs. Little girls must not be allowed to abandon their ambitions because there must be more women at the highest levels of Soviet power where they can impose some of those *human* qualities of compassion and understanding, of which they have learned to be proud. In this period of turbulence the structures of Soviet power need every positive human resource they can tap. Mikhail Gorbachev has promised a more humane society for the Soviet Union, but the whole enterprise risks foundering on man-made catastrophes.

[1]This survey was described to me by Dr. T. I. Yufereva, one of the authors of the curriculum on "The Ethics and Psychology of Family Life" when I interviewed her at the Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology in June, 1983.

[2]Unfortunately few of Dr. Kon's writings are available in English. Among other works, he has produced an excellent text on adolescence for teachers, and a study of sexuality published in 1988 that sold out within forty minutes. The comments I have quoted here came from private interviews between 1984 and 1988.

[3]*Etica i Psikhologia semenoy zhizna;* pod. red. I.B. Grebennikova, Izdatelstva "Prosvechenya," 1984.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 52.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 57.

[6]These statistics and comments come from Dr. Viktor Perevedentsev, the Soviet Union's pre-eminent demographer whom I interviewed in 1986 and who is frequently quoted by Western journalists.

*Landon Pearson is the chairperson of the Canadian Council on Children and Youth. Her background is in education and psychology and her major interests are in children and children's issues. Her husband was Canadian Ambassador to the USSR from 1980 to 1983 and she has just completed a book entitled* Children of Glasnost; a Generation in the Making *to be published by Lester and Orpen Dennys in the spring of 1990.*