Gender Identity in Russia
A Comparison of Post World War II and

by Marina Malysheva

L'auteure procure une analyse sociologique et historique de l'idéologie et des propagandes sur les relations entre hommes et femmes entre les années 1950 et 1900. L'auteure nous fait part des témoignages de deux générations (mères et filles) concernant leurs expériences de travail.

"The modern man wants his wife always to look her best, to be in love with him, and to have a job. But it is too much, it wears the woman out. This is why I divorced my husband and never found another."

The 1950s and '60s were perhaps the most contradictory period in determining women's place in Russian society. As before, they were expected to be active builders of communism and they were called upon to give birth to many children. The myth of the "superwoman" was created—a woman who could make great scientific discoveries and bear children one after another. Carefully produced by the mass media, these myths influenced a whole generation and women tore themselves apart trying to fulfill all that was demanded on them (Malysheva).

The more they failed, the harder became the battle of priorities between domestic and public spheres. This battle did not give rise to the emergence of women as a social pressure group, but "many of the changes that have caused or reflected increasing conflict and contradiction in the lives of Western women were under way in the Soviet Union" (Brine *et. al.* 41). Divorce rates rose and birth rates fell. Furthermore, the phenomenon of the "convenient job," became dominant in the professional orientations of women (Harchev and Golod 46). It was the next generation only that learned the real "price of convenience" (Sharpe 51).

Larisa Pechatnikova (born in 1938), has passed through all the changes mentioned above in her personal life: she had one child, she took "a convenient job" and she got divorced.

Larisa graduated from a Moscow secondary school in 1956. In 1964, she entered the Mining Institute and a year later she married. She was already 28 and wanted to have a child. Larisa's husband was also a student and for this reason his relatives were against the marriage. Nevertheless, one year after the marriage they had a child. Larisa had to stop her studies. Anatoly, her husband, was of the opinion that women did not need an education at all.

The young couple realized very quickly that their views and perceptions of gender roles in family life differed greatly. As Larisa said:

> *The thing is that I grew up in a family where everyone was used to doing everything themselves. I have very many useful skills. I see what needs to be done and, if I do not know how to do it, I just learn. It was always understood in my family that the husband and head of the family has to work very hard. The woman takes care of the children, always looks attractive, and keeps her house tidy and well-run. But I've found out that very few men are able to provide for their families. The modern man wants his wife always to look her best, to be in love with him, and to have a job. But it is too much, it wears the woman out. This is why I divorced my husband and never found another. So I must provide for myself. I am independent by nature, I am able to earn as much as I need. But if a man were prepared to provide for me, I'd respect him for it and get married again.*
>
> *I often told my husband what to do or that something should have been done differently. But men can not stand a clever woman—no man would live with a woman cleverer than himself. This is probably the chief characteristic feature of Russian men. "Why should I be working for you?" my husband used to ask. "You should have a job just like me." But he also used to shout indignantly, "I did not get married to iron my own clothes and cook my own food. I've got a wife to do all that."*

Her husband's complaints were very hard for Larisa to bear especially because their daughter Ann was born very ill (muscular dystrophy of legs). Larisa had to stay at home with Ann for five years. As soon as she started to work again, Anatoly left the family.

The most amusing thing during the interview was that Larisa did not speak about her job at all. Ann, on the contrary, spoke only about business. I had to put additional questions to Larissa to learn that she became a seamstress and was working in a Moscow *atelier*/design studio. As for Ann, my additional questions hardly helped. She could not talk about personal life without returning to the theme of work. Business and life were extricably linked for Ann.

Ann graduated from secondary school in 1984 where, in the upper classes, she and her fellow students were given the opportunity to learn a trade. Ann chose clothes-making, which she unexpectedly found fascinating. Throughout the summer Ann attended the course and was, as she put it, "in a fever." She realized it was her true vocation. As

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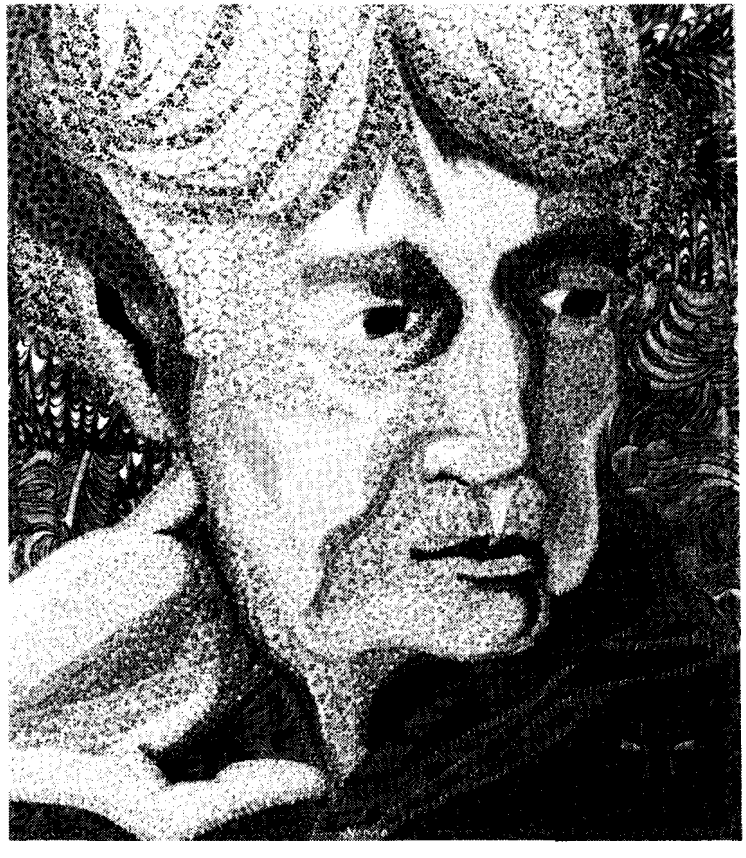
always, Larisa did not encourage her daughter: "A seamstress's daughter will never learn to make clothes."

Nevertheless, Ann enrolled in the vocational school at the nearby clothing factory to train as a quality controller. She was sure practical experience was essential for this job and combined her training with work at the factory. The next year, Ann went to night school at the Textile Institute and continued working at the clothing factory.

After a while, Ann was transferred to the factory's small design studio, where she began at the bottom and ended up as a deputy head of the experimental design shop—the intellectual center and brain of the factory. She was invited to attend a vast number of fashion shows, even ones closed to the general public. Work at the factory was immensely instructive. Ann realized that her failure to qualify for daytime education had been a blessing in disguise as her work provided plenty of practical experience. She saw that many people who came to the factory straight from college were not really up to much. Meanwhile her own range of contacts grew very quickly.

The beginning of Ann's career coincided with the onset of *perestroika* and the emergence of the cooperative movement. Her factory job was nine-to-five, and she found the tight schedule irksome. She began to look around for another position and was offered the job of production manager in a newly established company in the fur sector.

> *We opened in December 1988. This was when I left the factory. My mother did not know anything about it. But when she learned that I was in the cooperative sector, she began to treat me as an "enemy of the people." The company paid me 1,200 roubles a month, while the factory paid 96 roubles. Prior to this my biggest salary had been 140 roubles, when I was a quality controller on the licence line. Of course I learned a great deal there, but the salary was just too small. Besides, my back had begun to trouble me, and I never fulfilled the plan in any case. I used to cry going home from the factory. I was so exhausted I did not even notice if my bag came open or my hat was askew. I continued to sew even in my dreams and my right shoulder was constantly on fire. That was an awful time.*



Deidre Scherer, "Line of Thought," Fabric and Thread, 9.5" x 8", November 1992 *Photo: Jeff Baird*

This passage illustrates the social identity of the generation to which Larisa belongs. Her expression "the enemy of the people"[1] is key to understanding the Soviet state of mind during the transition to the new market economy. Gender does not play a role; at the heart of it is class consciousness, the traditional division of people into those who are exploited (factory workers) and those who exploit (private cooperative managers), regardless of whether they are women or men. It is absolutely clear that these views are rooted in the Stalinist epoch, the time in which Larisa was socialized.

Thus it happened that mother and daughter found themselves on opposite sides of the "barricade." The social identity of Larisa was strongly attached to the working class (seamstresses in Russia are regarded as skilled workers). In a situation of social stability, this identity was maintained by solidarity with millions of other workers who were getting approximately the same salary and had the same organization of labour and conditions of life. The feeling of equality in status and material level of existence gave meaning and dignity to her life.

As soon as *perestroika* started and the normal pattern of life was disrupted, the social identity of workers was lost. Larisa, who was making clothes "haut couture" (as Ann said about her mother), realized that her status and especially her salary were slipping. Her qualifications remained high but her position in the market dropped instantaneously. *Perestroika* did not leave any room for older people who worked in the state sector. One had to

start cooperative production to win the battle for life. But cooperative activity and private property were proclaimed criminal after the revolution.[2] Larisa believed this ideology and to reject it would mean recognizing that she had been cheated, which is psychologically extremely hard for people of her age. But this is only the half of the explanation.

The main reason for her resistance to the social transformation of Soviet society is common to the majority of the Russian people. It stems from the mechanism of identity formation that is based primarily on the value-oriented component of behaviour instead of rational and purpose-oriented behaviour. Social values are in the process of disintegration in contemporary Russia and the philosophy of the market economy is not an adequate substitute. Larisa experienced a bitter feeling of disappointment with the whole situation in the country, which she felt to be demeaning for most of people. She was so frustrated that she even put the Stalinist label of the "people's enemy" on her daughter and kept it there for months.

"Why do so many women have complexes? Because at first they love their husbands and do everything. But men get used to the sacrifices that women make. And this is the root of all evil in family life."

This happened five years before my interview with Larisa, but she was still upset. She remained indignant about the economic and social reforms. The terrible social backward slide of workers even paved the way for her to argue in defence of the former social order despite the information that had come to light thanks to *glasnost*. For example, Larisa said that repressions were not as large scale as the papers suggested. She was convinced that historians and journalists had exaggerated the horrors of the Stalinist regime. Larisa's argument was based on the fact that on the street she had lived as a child, where mainly industrial workers lived, no one was arrested except her father. She refused to accept objections that the repressions were at their most severe in 1930s, not the 1940s when she was old enough to notice things, and that they had hit mainly intellectuals, people who were able to see the faults of the social system.

The new identity and the post-communist experience

Ann's post-communist experience has led her both to a more negative evaluation of the past, as well as a more positive perception of the future. A representative of the younger generation, she has strong motives for supporting future reforms:

> *My company is expanding, and I am sure my time will come. I go on searching for high-quality materials and equipment for the firm—this is something all furriers are doing. We all act in several capacities, including that of suppliers. In this country it has never been possible just to pay money and receive the goods you need. Everything has to be done through personal contacts. Say I need some fabric for a lining. Well, I cannot just arrive at a factory making it and give them money for their product. This is a country of barter. And even offering something in exchange would be useless if they do not know me personally, while if they do they'll at least listen to me.*
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> *To arrange things at the firm during my first weeks I worked such long hours that my mother must have forgotten what I looked like. I made phone calls, scoured shops, visited factories. I used to spend the company's money to buy furs at my own discretion. I calculated whether the purchase was economically justified and estimated the probable profit. Whatever happens, I am bound to the people working with me, I admire them as specialists, and I am going to try to win recognition here and nowhere else.*

Ann now identifies herself directly with the new class of people making their own business. It does not matter that she has the same profession as her mother. This is the case of the upward mobility from the working-class strata to management. Having been appointed by the director of the firm to organize the process of production, Ann is achieving her aim via the recognition of her skills by the older professionals.

The following story that Ann told about her private life is completely based on gender reflections. They are concentrated around the growing contradictions of women's double identity and traditional psychology of men:

> *My friends and slightly older men have learned to earn enough money to provide for the family. And so they say: "A woman's place is at home, she shouldn't have a career but be domestic." A friend of mine said: "I'd marry you if you'd agree to stay at home." He wants his wife to welcome him when he comes home from work, to show her love, to do all the housework, but he would not respect her for it. He'd be a sultan, and you, one of the concubines in his harem. First he is in love with you, but then he begins looking at other women. If a man could respect me for bringing his children up, if he regarded me as equal to him—he works at his job and I work at home looking after the hearth—then I'd have abandoned my career. But men do not appreciate what women do at home, they do not consider this a full-time job. They do not see the woman as the family goddess, do not realize that she is the family stronghold.*
>
> *Why do so many women have complexes? Because at first they love their husbands and do everything to make the home their fortress. They are prepared to slave for their men. But men get used to this so easily, they just take*

everything for granted. As far as they are concerned this devotion is not something that deserves love. They get used to the sacrifices that women make. I know love is not eternal, but it grows into respect all too seldom. And this is the root of all evil in family life.

These criticisms of women's conscription to domestic activity is widespread among Russian women. Alix Holt, (in the late 1970s), wrote:

> None of the women I spoke to romanticised their role in the home. They stated quite unequivocally that they found housework exhausting, both physically and mentally...In every family the housework was a source of conflict. (Brine *et.al.* 43)

"If I stay unmarried, by 30 I'll be much further ahead. I shall probably marry somebody who will promote my career, and I do not want children. I've long known staying at home is not for me."

Nevertheless this conflict was not rationalized or elevated to the level of feminist theory and transformed into a feminist movement either in the 1970s or at the beginning of the 1990s. According to Genia Browning and Armorer Wason, *perestroika* was accompanied by ideologies which brought biologism to the fore. The shorter working day and week, proposed under Brezhnev, was put into effect. Support came from many women themselves, exhausted by the treadmill of continuing conflicts between work and family.

A solution of this kind is misleading. Peggy Watson who has analyzed the current changes in patriarchy in Eastern Europe is correct when she noted that:

> The sting in the tail of the process is that "normal" liberal market society inevitably encodes a relationship of relative worth between the genders through its separation of public and private spheres, where women are identified with the latter and men with the former. The de-grading of feminine identity which this entails cannot be known before it is experienced. (473)

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to generalize about the lack of such experience amongst most women in Russia. Ninety per cent of them in the post-war generation held full-time jobs in the labour market.

A significantly higher proportion of women had higher education and prestigious professions than women in the West. And although they were absent from the decision-making level, at the same time within their families they were completely responsible for everything.

What is true is that the dramas of their personal experience were never recognized in society. Indeed, they were advertised as the achievement of the emancipation process. As a result:

> the subsequent generations of Soviet women, cut off from the thinkers, the ideas, and the experiment generated by their own revolution, learned to call this "socialism" and to call this "liberation." (Goldman 343)

No doubt Larisa is representative of one such subsequent generation. She does not criticize the regime for the terrible burden which it put on women's shoulders. She regards this burden as age old. "Life is cruel, especially for women. God, help a woman who is not strong enough!" Nonetheless she was not humble. She rejected the unjust order of domestic life and initiated divorce. This was "a question of dignity," Larisa said.

Located in the domestic rather than public sphere, the question of gender relations was resolved for decades through divorce. The socialization of the younger generation in Russia was characterized by gender confrontation. No wonder that Ann, who was the observer of this "battle" in her family, has changed her life strategy. The experience of her mother taught her to think about future in terms of responsibility and independence. She has absolutely consciously given the firm the chief part of her life. Despite her 27 years and her good looks, she is not going to be married:

I have so many interests and I am so demanding that I simply can't find a husband. There is a man I like very much, he is a musician, his ideas of family life and his other views suit me. But he is a pauper. He has a job but the pay is pitiful. He plays in the band and he is quite content. That is, as I see it, for me everything still lies ahead, while he has no future. If I stay unmarried, by the age of 30 I'll be much further ahead. I shall probably marry somebody who will be able to promote my career, and I do not want children. I've long known staying at home is not for me.

This current shift in gender relations is still not recognized by among policy makers. They ignore the gender aspect of the transition to the market. There are some fundamental reasons for that—women are needed as a resource of the cheap labour force and as a bearers of children in a situation of unprecedented demographic decline. But now it looks like the ruling "democrats" will lose the battle. Every nation has a survival instinct which is especially keen in a crisis situating. This crisis has come and the younger generation of women, which is deprived by the state of equal opportunity, is manifesting its rejection of the former patriarchal models by mass participation in beauty contests, unregistered cohabitations, low

birthrates, late marriages, and marriages with foreigners and emigration from the country.

This article is written in the framework of a research project initiated in Russia by the Director of the Center for Social Mobility Studies in Maison Des Sciences de L'Homme (France), Daniel Bertaux.

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[1]This term was introduced by Stalin during the period of the Great Terror and it was used against everybody who was not loyal to communist regime or party authorities. It had a crucial meaning for a destiny of a person. The label, "enemy of the people" automatically led to imprisonment and it could be attached to someone without any proof, just because of the suspicion or antipathy of any official. Later on this label became so widespread that any envious neighbour could use it for his own purpose. After the death of Stalin the term was so firmly fixed in the language and consciousness of the older generation that they continued to use it in their common life as a characteristic for those whom they regarded unjust with the working class people.
[2]The cooperative movement in the USSR existed for a short while in the 1920s, during the New Economic Policy, and was regarded as a temporary concession to capitalism and as betrayal of the interests of the working class and the nation at large. The idea that private property was the worst social evil had been instilled for decades, and Larisa never doubted this.

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LYN LIFSHIN

Sadie Says Goodbye

to the bridge players at the Y
on Flatbush. She brings a goodbye
in couplets to the woman who taught
poetry to her senior citizen group,

told Sadie she could see her dark
pines grow up from the page.
She won't need the raffle ticket
for a microwave, the extra subway

token. She packs a few dresses,
writes a cousin in Kansas, "Isaac,
I'd like to see you one more time
but I'm eager for a little while

with my daughter. And though I know
those poorly lit rooms, remember
the knocks in blackness, I choose
this, to leave these rooms I

longed for, thought I'd die in.
I write you my last night in
this city of lights. Already I
feel shadows in those small

rooms where the samovar may be all
that warms my fingers. But my heart
burns like feet barefoot in the
snow outside Leningrad for what

I won't leave again

Lyn Lifshin's poetry appears earlier in this volume.