Women in Latvia Today
Changes and Experiences

by Irina Novikova

Cet article examine les expériences des femmes de Lettonie après la restauration de l'indépendance. Les transitions post-soviétiques accompagnées d'une prise de conscience des hiérarchies politiques, économiques et sociales offrent à ces femmes des perspectives économiques intéressantes et une nouvelle mobilité sociale.

The endeavour to recreate the prewar Republic of Latvia has revealed problematic aspects because the politics of "regaining normality" is confronted with a dramatically changed Latvian society.

Latvia matured into a national unity within the confines of the Russian empire and became an independent state in the twentieth century. The birth of the nation-state was the result of external factors—World War I and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The young Latvian nation-state underwent political changes from the democratic developments of the 1920s to the setup of dictatorship in 1934 and forced incorporation in the USSR in 1940. This long-term process resulted in changing the economic, social, and gender relations that were characteristic for Latvian society before 1940.

Since 1940, the peoples of Latvia have gone through experiences common to the population of the Soviet Union: deportations, the devastation of World War II, and forced restructuring of the traditional economy and way of life. The restoration of Latvia's independence entailed the process of defining the country's 50-year political and economic dependency with the Soviet socialist system. The democratic endeavour to recreate the nation-state of the prewar Republic of Latvia through political, economic, and legislative measures has already revealed its problematic aspects because the politics of "regaining normality" is confronted with a dramatically changed Latvian society.

The postwar politics of forced industrialization and modernization was carried out in part due to the internal migration of the female labour force from rural to urban areas in Latvia and by inviting women from other territories of the Soviet Union. Industrial urban areas have become highly populated by non-Latvian people. Riga, the capital of Latvia, the largest industrial and cultural center of the country, is now populated by more than 40 per cent of non-Latvians, mainly, people who moved to the country in the post-war period and their offspring. The discontinuity, thus, provides an inherently controversial meaning for the "return to the past," especially from a woman's point of view, a native woman of Latvia and a postwar settler.

In the Soviet period a majority of non-indigenous people, though engaged in politics and economy, were not integrated in the Latvian cultural and linguistic community. The Latvian taught in non-Latvian schools was not the language of political, ideological, bi-cultural, social and economic interactions. "Colonizer" attitudes were not rare. Sovietization through the politicized Russian language simultaneously promoted the gradual national and cultural identity of its non-Latvians with the Soviet socialist system.

For Latvians, on the other hand, the Soviet period turned out to be the time of bitter disillusionments and losses. Latvian national history was incorporated into Soviet determinist historiography, and memories of the past were kept in the "counter-reality" of the familial circle—the language-protecting sphere and the domain of the maternal.

In Soviet socio-political and economic transformation, the homeland—the Mother's space—was becoming detached from the nation; and the idea of a traditional home with its family attachments was losing its historically and socially rooted values. The condition of being Other—to one's own history, own motherland—dominated the national consciousness. Life in/under the Soviet regime simultaneously romanticized the image of the past free motherland and shaped a split existence. The woman-mother became a symbolic site of the repressed otherness of the nation to its historical memory; its sociocultural reproductions were blocked by the reality of the Soviet present.

A shared dream, however, may easily become utopian. The alternative imaginary that stimulates a radical change in the existing power relations can incorporate and reproduce the mechanism of repression embedded in these power relations during restructuring. As Nanette Funk argued, it is the tendencies on the level of the totality (the Soviet Union) that stimulated the processes in the particulars (the republics).

These issues are very significant for understanding the present-day political and economic situation and looking into women's experiences and self awareness in Latvia and the problems confronting a national women's movement in the post-Soviet transitional period. Today women in both Latvian and non-Latvian communities constitute

the majority of the population—53 per cent. Women, both Latvian and non-Latvian, are maximally employed due to the high level of their general and special education. In 1989, the number of women in the labour market was 54.9 per cent of workforce. What has to be emphasized is that women in Latvia, as well as women of other post-Soviet countries, have already had for several generations access to employment and education, social services, maternity benefits, and protective labour legislation.

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sector. The policies immediately caused problems in the industrial sector, particularly in the highly feminized (chemical, pharmaceutical, electronic, textile) industries where non-Latvian urban women prevail. Industrial stoppages, legislative changes in terms of restoration of property, invasions of imported cheaper foodstuffs, a very determined policy on the part of The Bank of Latvia to prop up the Lat as a competitive, strong currency, and the resulting credit policy of the banking network has also effected rural regions, where Latvian women-citizens dominate. The sociological prognosis of the current situation in the labour market reveals that in the course of industrial privatization and gradual decrease of the managerial staff, female unemployment and, in particular, the white-collar female unemployment is likely to increase dramatically.

Women, who are the majority of the labour force, are also the majority of the unemployed (63.2 per cent of registered as unemployed in Riga, the capital of Latvia). Women with higher education lose their jobs first. In 1992, the income of 80 per cent of the population fell below the poverty line. Benefits cannot be increased because of the growing budget deficit. The minimum wage lags behind the minimum subsistence level. Lack of an elementary infrastructure to support women as homemakers and soaring inflation (60 per cent in the middle of 1992) increases the tension that women feel every day in fulfilling their duties in the family (Ostrovska 302).

During the Soviet period, education, professionalism, and certain protective measures for women in the labour sphere gave some guarantee of a stable social status. The post-Soviet transformations gave rise to dramatic changes in women's status and self-awareness. The remaining elements of the welfare state cannot replace the vanished policies and the social service network of the socialist "nanny state," and the growing market economy unveils its most rigid forms of women's exploitation. Most women would opt for lower professional status, even its loss, but for guaranteed lower pay. Moreover, the younger generations of women do not have the knowledge and experience to protect their rights in the labour market. The pronatalist slogans cannot stimulate young women who would not like to lose their job if they take maternity leave for three years because there is no guarantee that an enterprise would agree to keep the job (or an enterprise can go bankrupt). Secondly, maternity allowance is miserably low in comparison with a salary, quite low as well because of incessantly high inflation. A serious problem for a young mother-worker, either part-time or full-time, is an essentially non-existent pre-school care network.

Women are not empowered politically to protect their rights in the labour market and to struggle for social programs. The movement for independence did not prioritize women's issues, and women who took a very active part in the grassroots movement for restoration have delegated their interests to men in all political decision-making bodies. There are only 15 women in the 100-seat Parliament. The problem is whether their representation of radically different political interests will contribute to their cooperation for promoting women's issues and interests.

Women's present-day existence on the margins is embedded in multiple factors, and the complexity of the changes in women's lives cannot be reduced only to

> the result of the ideology as well as practice of "equal rights" that prevailed for over 40 years under a totalitarian regime. Women therefore view participation in politics as just one more not quite necessary burden. The totalitarianism of mobilizing women to participate formally in politics contributed to this view. The totalitarian institutionalization of women's dual role as wage earner and wife/mother/housekeeper led to the strengthening of male dominance in the public sphere and to social patriarchy. (Ostrovska 301)

This view assumes that the gender politics of the Soviet period radically changed the forms of gender limitations for women's roles that prevailed in independent Latvia before 1940. In fact, what is common to both the Latvian experience before and after 1940 is the lack, even absence, of women's awareness of their possible, autonomous, separate, standpoint and voice in politics. In this sense, the Soviet model of exploiting women's self-image through a non-patriarchal rhetoric of equal rights and gender ideology towards family and motherhood is not in opposition to the post-Soviet tendency of returning women's consciousness to historically interrupted tradition. Today a woman-mother, with her overall marginalization and impoverishment, is granted the essential pillar role of symbolic authority, an imagined receptacle of the past and hope for the future.

It should be emphasized that the traditional cult of motherhood in Latvia did not limit motherhood to being the site of biological/linguistic/cultural reproduction. Mothering was part of the symbolic practices that shaped national identity during the interwar period. Even now women praise family and motherhood more than romantic love. Contemporary Latvian women are very conscious of the fact that motherhood is a symbolic priority for the process of national unification. The stereotype of a strong mother-worker, maintaining and addressing the values of the past, has become essential for political and ideological totalization today.

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In 1992 a collection of essays entitled *Mother*, a reprint of the 1933 edition, was published. The author of the introduction to the reprint wrote: "It is necessary to remember now the forgotten lessons of the past"(Mate 3). The call to return to past traditions precedes the discussions of the pre-war Latvian theologians about the woman-mother's virtues. The essays are mainly moralizing sentiments of domesticated femininity and a mother/Mother's enshrinement at home under the umbrella of Biblical authority. A mother's role is inseparable from "the sorrowful road" of Christ's Mother. "God is Sunday and he gives us brightness for a whole week, but mother, a dear and good working-day, has to work diligently" (Mate 14). "How much she can be paid for her work? Our mothers did not think about such things, they did not need any glory" (Mate 31). "Mother herself bears silent powers that lead life and give directions. Since times immemorial they have been associated with everything clean and clear. They have to remain such mothers (Mate 31). A woman-mother who was the site of a repressed otherness has to regain the status of a voiceless aesthetic object accepting this marginal and magical role.

In prioritizing women's acknowledged and legitimated role and maternal contribution to the national state, women are also celebrated as artists in and of the interior. This reminds us of the gender politics in Latvia of the 1930s, the politics of "a defence of housework, trying to turn it into an art-form and the need to increase women's role in "cultural activities" and "good works." Great emphasis was placed on the need for a "tasteful," sparklingly clean home. (Trapenciere 42). Typically, the women's press in the Latvian language glorifies the representation of women as creators of private spaces. We witness the re-channeling of energy away from public professionalism toward the productive artistry of homemaking.

The articulation of the claims for limited women's roles, the precedence of maternal duties, the politics of "soft escapism" keep in the shadows the "hard reality" of social issues, growing class division, prostitution, the problems of working, rural, unemployed, harassed, and raped women. Information on contraception is practically absent. There is a tremendous gap between unvoiced and unproblematized women's experiences and the accumulation of representations that persist in their idealization of the family and the foregrounding of maternal duties. The unproblematizing strategy of the women's press today is subversive not in terms of the developing power relations and their societal and economic structuring, but in terms of women's existence, self-esteem and status.

There is only one woman's magazine for Russian-reading women in Latvia. A Russian woman myself, I am introduced to the world of special, selected women, with a touch of femme fatale persona. The string of images—Mermaid, Cinderella, Femme Fatale, a Businessman's Good Wife—hardly defines or represents any kind of non-Latvian women's interests and concerns. It creates a strange symbolic environment that channels a woman reader's attention abroad, either to Russia or Great Britain or America. I sense myself in the informational and representational vacuum behind this pictured world of specially "cooked" images—sensual-sexual, menhunters, she-wolves and enchantresses, etc. Russian women constitute the majority of the non-Latvian population and they are unrepresented. Or are they nonrepresentable in the current ideological discourses? Latvian women's magazines do not consider the coverage of the experiences of this female group as important in reflecting the individual perceptions of the dominant "climate of opinion." But what I see and read in the Russian women's magazine *Lilit* is the internalized, accepted self-positioning of the Other to the social, economic, and political reality of the country.

Taking into account that the audience is the implied Other, our absent presence inhabits this women's discourse. What is in our implied presence that justifies this kind of representational politics? This strange detachment of our selves as female readers of the magazine for women, this sttange delegation of non-Latvian women's interests and concerns outside our reality is a symptom of a certain sociopsychological condition in the non-Latvian women-residents' community whose national identities were once transformed into a potent political myth called "us." After its collapse, what can motivate their enlistment in any collectivity, any imagined community either internal (in the country) or external (ethnic motherland)? Non-Latvian women face a confrontation with their own psychological fragmentation on a personal and collective level that is strongly supported by the dominant politics of citizenship.

The Latvian government has argued that it introduced the citizenship quota system for demographic reasons (*EIU*

Country Report 25). In 1993 ethnic Latvians constituted 54.2 per cent of total population. The mortality rate exceeded the birth rate by 12,438 in 1993, and by 4,700 in the first quarter of 1994. The number of live births in 1993 was 10.3 per 1,000, the lowest for 50 years (*EIU Country Report* 25). The demographic problem is constructed exclusively in the political focus of national priorities, and motherhood symbolized as a pillar of national survival is viewed as threatened by the substantial non-Latvian presence.

The citizenship issue has actually revealed its disruptive factors in the times of radical and social change, forced mobility and determined idealistic aspirations to "cleanse" the rejected fifty-year history. At the same time, the law, if adopted, may become the veiled form of the state control of women-residents' reproductive status and rights. Implicitly, woman-resident's reproductive status may be treated as at least unwelcomed for state demographic policy. A body of woman-mother that enshrines the actual gendering of societal relations may become a site of biological-symbolical hierarchy in which the stigmatization of the past will go through the reproduction of psychological and political Othering in a substantial resident community. This situation will position women of different political statuses in the mutually problematic relationship since they become the oppositionally marked targets of state priorities, control, and protection measures.

The citizenship quota may mean different degrees of protector-protected relations with a state for a Latvian woman-citizen and a non-Latvian woman-resident. Women who were a substantial group of employees-clients in the Soviet state unfortunately seem to preserve this position as agents in the labour market and clients in social service networks, and the citizenship factor may play a controversial role in the dynamics of protector-protected and in the legislative politics in the process of gendering the structures of the labour sphere. Citizen status may develop into a form of rigid gender subordination whereas resident status may develop a different gender dynamics in the non-Latvian resident community, thus, restructuring women-residents' relations with the hierarchy of the labour market, their different social mobility and different developments in their self-consciousness and self-image as a distinct cultural discourse.

The tendencies in the press for women also reflect another aspect of Latvian women's consciousness and women's movement in present-day Latvia that has to deal constructively with their own legacy. The awakening and development of Latvian women's intellectual and spiritual endeavours at the turn of the century was closely connected with the ideology of a young national intelligentsia. Anatol Lieven emphasized that the Baltic national movements prior to 1914 "were more cultural than they were political, or rather, since the task was actually to create nations where none had existed, politics and culture were indistinguishable" (Lieven 51).

Women's awareness of promoting their status and roles was developing alongside the growing sense of Latvia as a unity, not a country yet, but a culturally, linguistically, economically autonomous region of the Russian empire. The chairwoman of The Latvian Women's National League Berta Pipinya wrote: "The national word possessed magic power.... The scattered Latvians had to be taken care of and united by women of this nation through national ideals in different forms" (Trapenciere 169). The aim of The League was "to promote the prosperity of the national culture, to unite women and to educate them in a national spirit, to take care of the upbringing of a new generation" (Trapenciere 169). The late nineteenth-early twentieth century was the period of the active development of national culture and identity, the progress in Latvian women's education and changes in women's self-consciousness. The women's movement, its ideology and goals were inseparable from the development of national identity and historical consciousness at the turn of the century and later, during the interwar period. Today the situation of women from both communities in Latvia is different in many respects and the policy of returning women to tradition, i.e., to the "private sphere," is not viable. The restructuring of the society and economy needs women's involvement in the expanding service sector and in the productive sectors of economy. But the politics of "returning" women's consciousness to the "naturalized" pattern of sex-roles and politically compatible forms of their collective activities is part of the whole mechanism for gendering the political and economic hierarchy of the re-appropriated collective identity. The family as the basic stabilizing institution is essential to establishing and maintaining men's power in the state sphere (as opposite to their weakness as gatekeepers and breadwinners in the Soviet command economy). If the family used to be in opposition to the state-oppressor, now the role of family as a basic unit of the nation-state is prioritized.

What is common to women's magazines in Latvia today is the exclusion of certain experiences behind the pretended Us-ness in the Latvian title *Sieviete* (Woman), or the Russian subtitle of *Lilit—The Magazine for All Women*, the failure to deal productively with women's national diversity, the tendency towards the target audience of middle-class women as economically privileged members, and the reluctance of women's press to function as woman-to-woman communication. The situation today demands that new choices be made about the policies of the magazines that pretend to give voice to women if they care to justify their work for the sake of this very problematic and controversial target audience behind the constructed Us-ness and Other-ness.

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BARBARA WILLIAMS

Blood-Flowers

for the victims of Timisoara
and Bucharest, Romania
December 1989

gunfire shatters
sunset's dying blaze
in forest stillness emptied trucks remain
animals have fled this scene of human carnage
raw and red

bayonets have fixed the last one to the ground
(the driver of the final vehicle)
no witnesses but nature left around
and you have left
your last breath warming snowflakes
as they fall
your life-blood spent, melts crystal-frost on rock
your last gifts to this land
blood-flowers on snow

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SIBELAN FORRESTER

Pears

Jela walks through the Zagreb market
judging the bounty of autumn:
peppers yellow and red, lemons,
late potatoes from the Zagorje,
oil-cured olives and sugared figs.
The little Albanian vendor who praised
my gold-rimmed glasses years ago
still offers soft golden mandarines:
the skin comes off like a glove, he says,
and no white fingers cling to the pieces.

But she is remembering the pears
that grew around her house in Bosnia
where now only mines are planted,
where bombs bloomed in the place
of the spring's white lace: kanjuske,
zutavke, slatke, yellow and sweet,
the tiny tart ones, the red-cheeked ones,
the ones from the tree her sons would
climb.
She remembers all the kinds, like a woman
in a New England nursing home,
rehearsing
names of the old local apples, of orchards
whose farmers died so long ago,
back in someone's childhood.

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