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Women in Soviet society

Martine Mespoulet

Participation by women in economic, social and political activity in Russia started to increase from the end of the 19th century.¹ Many women campaigned for social and political change in their country and for emancipation in both private and public life. In this context, the Revolution in 1917 brought with it many hopes for them. Furthermore, after the Second World War the Soviet Union was characterised by a high rate of female economic activity and widespread participation by women in the education system.

This article will therefore attempt to explain what socialism brought for women in the USSR that was different. Did it transform their status in society? Was there development in the social relations between the sexes in the USSR between 1917 and 1991?

From theoretical debate to reality

In the 1920s, communist activists, both men and women, advocated equality between the sexes in all areas of public and private life.² In the tradition of Marxist writings, the Bolsheviks developed a set of conceptions concerning the emancipation of women in socialist society. Under socialism, a new life was going to transform the relations between the sexes. In particular, women were going to participate fully, on equal terms with men, in activities in the public sphere: work, political life and social activism. With this aim in mind, it was necessary to liberate them from domestic tasks by transferring the latter to the public sphere. Collective laundries, crèches and canteens employing women for pay would take care of the tasks that made up the domestic work previously done by women at home without pay.

By achieving the status of workers with pay, women would thus acquire genuine economic autonomy in relation to their husband and their family. The relations between the sexes would cease to be relationships of dependence and become relationships based on love and mutual respect. The marriage contract, which had effectively legalised a state of economic inequality, would become redundant. Men and women would live together in a "free union" and would be able to separate when they so wanted. No longer having either duties or an economic function, the family would eventually "fade away".

A decree was issued on equality between men and women as early as December 1917. The first Family Code was promulgated in 1918: religious marriage was abolished and only civil marriages were recognised. Illegitimate children were accorded the same rights as legitimate ones within a family. Divorce, which had been virtually inconceivable under the Tsar, became easy to obtain, on the basis of a simple registered application by one of the two spouses.

However, mentalities did not develop so quickly as the texts of laws. Indeed, the radicalism of the 1920s with regard to the family and relationships between the sexes is often exaggerated after the event. Lenin and the other Party leaders regarded the family primarily as a basic economic unit. The Soviet lawyers, for their part, felt that, in a period when the state did not yet have the means to ensure the wellbeing of its citizens, the family should continue to play an important role in this domain. In addition, from the end of the 1920s a change of attitude could be noted among the population as a whole and even among communist activists

¹ Richard Stites, *Women's Liberation Movement in Russia. Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978.

² Women only constituted a small minority in the Party at this time.

themselves. A kind of weariness found expression among the population in the face of various social experiments, including those affecting the family and the private life of individuals. The various forms of disintegration of the family were perceived as a social evil and moral chaos by an increasingly large section of the population. The instability of unions was a burden on women's lives. In the newspapers, an increasing number of women called for the laws protecting marriage to be strengthened.

The employment situation was also difficult for women throughout the 1920s. In a period marked by a shortage of jobs and a high unemployment rate, they suffered the full force of competition from men and quite clearly played the role of a reserve pool of labour. Thus, after the civil war, thousands of female workers were brutally dismissed from their jobs in industry and transport in order to make way for men who had been demobilised. Between 1923 and 1928 the proportion of women working in industry fell considerably.

A de facto sexual discrimination in the labour market can be seen throughout the 1920s. At the beginning of the first five-year plan, in 1928-1929, the increase in employment globally principally favoured men. Factory bosses preferred to take on men rather than women. The local trade union offices had the same attitude. In addition, there was strong resistance to the idea of accepting women as apprentices. Against this background, talk about developing skills helped to reinforce the process of sexual discrimination in the labour market. The efforts made by the Party to reverse this trend had little effect due to strong resistance at the grass roots, especially from qualified male workers.

Independence in relation to their husband and freedom from housework were thus even more difficult to achieve for women since they were unable to enjoy real financial independence due to the lack of a job or a wage that would enable them to cope with the needs of everyday life. Prostitution and the large number of abandoned children were the consequence of this situation for women on their own.

The invention of the "working mother"

The 1930s were marked by a strong wave of industrialisation in the USSR. In 1930 the Party launched a major campaign to encourage women to join the workforce en masse: 473,000 women went to work in industry, four times more than the number of new female recruits in 1929. The following year there were 587,000 of them. Between 1929 and 1935 nearly four million women took up a paid job, 1.7 million of them in industry. They were mainly recruited to non-qualified posts. By 1935 they represented 42% of the industrial workforce.

The state planners reorganised in a bureaucratic way the division of work between the sexes in different branches of activity, following norms that had been fixed in advance.³ Female work groups inspected the factories in order to decide which work could be entrusted to women. Certain professions, certain jobs, even entire economic sectors, became domains that were largely reserved for women. The establishment of this sexual segregation at work was thus organised and planned by the state. According to Wendy Goldman, the establishment of a sexual segregation in the workforce, still visible today in the Russian economy, was essentially the result of the redistribution of roles implemented in the early 1930s.⁴

Public debates about discrimination affecting women in the trade unions and in the workplace died away after 1933. In any case, after 1934 there was no longer any organisation

³ Wendy Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁴ Ibid.

likely to take an interest in the problems encountered by women at work. That year saw the disbanding of the Committee for the Improvement of the Living and Working Conditions of Working Women.⁵

The 1930s also marked a turning-point in family policy. As a result of the drop in the birth rate and the slow population growth, the Soviet state introduced policies aimed at encouraging people to have children. A new concept appeared in the language used by political leaders and lawyers, that of the "strong socialist family", presented as a basic cell that was essential for the construction of socialism, and characterised by a stable marriage, a high fertility rate, and a reinforcement of parental authority. Abortion was forbidden in 1936, and divorce was made more difficult and more expensive. Women were encouraged to have many children while still going to work. Various measures were aimed at helping mothers, in particular taking a harder line in the law on alimony and an increase in benefits for large families. The strengthening of the family was interpreted as a step towards normality after an inevitable period of disorder in the post-revolutionary years.

In their analysis of the status of women in the Soviet era, Russian sociologists identify the 1930s as the period when the "basic contract between the genders in Soviet society" was signed,⁶ a contract that they characterised as that of the "working mother", who had to take on simultaneously a full working day, the upbringing of her children, and the organisation of everyday life.⁷ In the second half of the 1930s, the propaganda in favour of the family promoted the image of women as noble figures engaged in the construction of socialism. Women were praised for their sense of sacrifice and their capacity for resistance. In official speeches they were presented as pillars of the family.

However, the ambivalence of the political language used in relation to Soviet women at this period needs to be emphasised, for the measures taken, for example in the case of abortion, helped to make their life more difficult. Taking into account the fact that housing conditions and the provision of goods were not improving, the rise in the number of births meant at the same time an increase in the difficulties of everyday life for women. Consequently, in spite of the risks run by both women and doctors in contravening the law, backstreet abortions increased.

Women from working-class and rural families and those who were employed had particular difficulties in dealing with the problems of everyday life. The time they spent in trying to resolve these difficulties prevented them from taking an active part in the activities of social organisations or the Party. Thus the percentage of women in the Komsomol (34% in 1935) was twice as high as it was for women in the Party, because the former were mostly young women without any children. On the other hand, they did gain widespread access to the education system. Even there, however, a few reservations need to be made, as we will see later, when we analyse the type of posts they held afterwards when they entered the world of work.

The turning-point of the Second World War

The Second World War cost the Soviet Union many human lives. With 27 million dead, its losses were greater than all the other combatant countries combined. An entire generation

⁵ The Zhenotdel, the women's department created by the Party in 1919, had already been closed down in 1930.

⁶ O.M. Zdravomyslova, *Sem'ia i obshchestvo: gendernoe izmerenie rossiiskoi transformatsii* [The family and society: gender-based measures in Russian transformation], Moscow, USSR, 2003.

⁷ A.A. Temkina, A. Rotkirkh, "Sovetskie gendernye kontrakty i ikh transformatsia v sovremennoi Rossii" [The contracts between the sexes in the USSR and their transformation in contemporary Russia], *Sotsiologicheskie issledovania*, no. 11, p. 4-14.

of men was decimated, giving rise to a considerable imbalance between the male and female populations: in 1959 there were 20 million more men than women. The age bracket most affected was that of those in their thirties. After having participated to an enormous extent in the war effort, whether at the front, in enterprises or in agriculture, women thus found themselves playing an active role in the process of reconstruction when the war effort was over, which consolidated the position they had acquired during the war. They constituted 57% of the non-agricultural labour force in 1943, and over 80% of the labour force in the collective farms in 1945.

Their place in the active population was strengthened in the 1960s, when the USSR faced a severe shortage of labour together with a new increase in economic growth. In this situation women represented an important reserve of labour. In fact, of the 17 million people of working age who were fit to work and did not hold a paid post, more than 90% were women. However, many of them found themselves unable to work due to the shortage of crèches and other social services. Others calculated that it was more worth their while to cultivate the plot of family land than to take a job.

The expansion of the service sector that occurred at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s began to draw them into the world of work, but the inequalities persisted. In spite of a substantial improvement in their level of education, women continued to do the least qualified and least paid jobs. In the 1980s there was a strong female presence in sectors such as health, education, retail sales and catering, where wages were 20 to 30% below the national average. They were over-represented in the lower levels of all sectors of activity and all branches of industry. More than 90% of the least well paid workers were women.

In spite of laws that officially favoured equality between the sexes and guaranteed female workers widespread protection, generous maternity leave, and obligatory breaks for young mothers to breastfeed their children, Soviet women were thus far from having equality with men in the world of work.

A survey published in 1974 in the journal *Sotsiologicheskie issledovania* provides information on the role of women in the organization of the daily life of families at this period.⁸ At the beginning of the 1970s, in working-class and agricultural families, the husband still played the role of head of the family, but it was the wife who was responsible for the household budget and who held the purse strings. The reason was simple: it was she who took on the responsibilities for everyday life in the family, in particular activities related to securing supplies and spending time in queues.

In the households of the intelligentsia, the responsibilities were shared, but in the following way: the mistress of the house took care of everyday expenditure, while the husband took decisions on larger items of expenditure or the choice of where to go on holiday. Responsibilities connected with education, such as taking the children to school or keeping an eye on their school work, seem to have fallen mainly on the women. However, as in West European countries, there was a tendency for this situation to develop towards a greater sharing with young couples.

Basing themselves on surveys on the way families made use of the time available to them, L.A. Gordon, E.V. Klopov and L.A. Onikov, in a work published in 1977,⁹ studied the development of the differences between the burden of work on the sexes between 1923 and 1970, making a distinction between work in production and domestic work. In spite of an overall reduction in the time spent each week on domestic work over the period studied, they were forced to conclude that this reduction was not very great, since the domestic burden

⁸ *Sotsiologicheskie issledovania*, no. 1, 1974. Survey carried out with 470 families in Moscow.

⁹ L.A. Gordon, E.V. Klopov, L.A. Onikov, *Tcherty sotsialisticheskogo obraza jizni. Byt gorodskikh rabotchikh vtchera, segodnia, zavtra*, [Characteristics of the socialist way of life. The everyday life of urban workers yesterday, today and tomorrow] Moscow, Znanie, 1977.

represented 34 hours per week for a woman who worked in 1923-1924 and 27 hours from the mid-1960s, and, for a man, 13 hours per week in 1923-1924, 12 hours from the 1930s to the mid-1960s, and 10 hours at the end of the 1960s.

In addition, the difference between the sexes remained considerable, because the domestic burden was 2.6 times as heavy for men as for women in 1923-1924, and was still 2.7 times as much at the end of the 1960s. This led the authors of the study to conclude, "For the majority of women who have a family and work, especially for those who have children that have not yet reached adulthood, the burden of domestic work remains approximately the same as in the past, 30 to 35 hours per week, and, as in the past, it is 2 to 3 times as high as the domestic activity of men." To this needed to be added the differences based on the social group and education of the women. The lower these were, the greater was the domestic burden.

It is interesting to note that these figures relating to the time spent on domestic tasks in the USSR in 1970 were very close to those published only slightly later for France, in 1974.¹⁰ In France, men devoted 10 hours a week to domestic work (as in the USSR in 1970), and women 28 hours (27 hours in the USSR). The total burden of weekly work was 66 hours for women in France (65 hours in the USSR) and 57 hours for men (51 hours in the USSR). These figures thus put into perspective the official line on the superiority of the socialist system in this respect. In reality, the model of the "working mother" meant working days that were long and hard for Soviet women.

The much-vaunted equality between the sexes cannot be evaluated simply on the basis of the legal and professional status of women. It also needs to be measured in the conditions of everyday life. Thus, the more housing becomes cramped, the greater the difficulty of domestic tasks, especially cleaning and tidying; the further shops are away from housing, the greater the burden in terms of journey times. In this respect, the development of collective services was not sufficient to promote equality between the sexes in the division of domestic tasks in the USSR. In addition, men still had an image of women as mistresses of the household who relieved them of domestic responsibilities. In a study carried out in the early 1970s, 20% of women said they found difficulty in reconciling their role of mother and the upbringing of their children with their professional activity; 52% declared that their situation was "bearable", which seems to be a euphemism, a conventional response.¹¹

The socialisation of the means of production was insufficient to create equality between the sexes in the USSR. In fact, state policy consisted mainly of extending maternity leave and promoting a more flexible organisation of working hours for working mothers.

The difficulty women have had in reconciling their roles in the private and public spheres can be seen very clearly in their low rate of representation in political bodies. In 1990, only 2 to 3% of women were members of bodies that took decisions of a political nature. As for the Communist Party, women represented 7.4% of its members in 1920, 14.8% in 1937, 19.7% in 1957, and 20.9% in 1967. In the latter year, they made up 2.8% of the members of the Central Committee. As for the Politburo and the Secretariat of the Central Committee, they were exclusively male bodies.¹² The same phenomenon is to be found at the local level. At the end of the 1980s, women represented 7% of the secretariats of the regional Party committees, although they made up 29% of Party members.

Conclusion

¹⁰ Anne Chadeau, Annie Fouquet, "Peut-on mesurer le travail domestique?", *Economie et statistique*, no. 136, 1981, pp. 29-43.

¹¹ See A.A. Temkinna, A. Rotkirkh, op. cit.

¹² *Izvestia*, 2 July 1988. See also G. Sillaste, "Jenchtchiny v KPSS i vne partii" [Women in the Communist Party of the USSR and outside the Party], *Politicheskaia sotsiologia*, no. 3, 1991.

Although the Bolshevik Party had drafted the most progressive legislation in the world in this field, the division of tasks in the family and of roles between men and women at work and in society were not really transformed in the USSR.

In this regard, it should be noted that this issue was not raised by the Bolsheviks with the idea of promoting an equal division of domestic tasks between men and women. Rather, the objective was to socialise women so as to free them for the labour market and the public domain. But the substitution of canteens, crèches, and collective laundries for domestic work required a degree of financing that the Soviet state was unable to provide. In any case, the priority given to heavy industry and military expenditure rather than to services and the production of consumer goods spelled the death of such an option.

Thus the very widespread access of Soviet women to the world of work gave them a relative economic autonomy,¹³ but this did not in any way free them from their double workload. The image of the "working mother" dominated the daily life of Soviet women.

¹³ At the end of the 1980s, the activity rate of women in the USSR was the highest in the world. More than 90% of women of working age had a job or were studying.