

## RUSSIAN GENDER RELATIONS

**Overview** From a matriarchal and democratic social structure to a life in segregation until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women played a secondary role in Russian society. This confinement came to an end in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and during the period of modernization and westernization women were able to receive an education and schooling. But this was not enough to combat high illiteracy, since until the 19<sup>th</sup> century only noble women were allowed to get an education, buy land, exercise their legal rights, and join the intelligentsia. However, in the same period little was done to improve the situation of the peasants or of poor women. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, intellectuals had come to believe that much more needed to be done for all the women of the empire. The solutions to women's issues in the next decades came with the Bolsheviks in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An overwhelmingly patriarchal society transformed itself into a gender neutral society, in which men and women were comparatively equal; this new society would fight for the equal rights of the women, and extend women's right to participate in the social and political life of the country.

### ANCIENT PERIOD

In the early period many tribes were matriarchal in structure, due to women's important roles within the tribe as mothers, gatherers, housekeepers and cooks. Archeologists have found 300 graves that belong to women dating from the Bronze Age to the second century AD, who were buried with axes, spears, swords, and arrows. Many of the graves contained female skeletons that bore combat injuries.

**Scythians:** There is compelling archeological evidence confirming that Scythians had warrior women who were buried with the same honors as men, with sacrificial horses, armor, weapons, tools and a great feast for the mourners.

**Sarmatians:** Sarmatian society retained some matriarchal characteristics (for example, women could be warriors until they married) in its early period, however this would change over time. There was also gender equality among the Sarmatians. Sarmatian woman sat on horseback to go hunting wearing the men clothes.

Later, with the domestication of animals and the development of agriculture, men's role in society became more important, resulting in a transition to a patriarchal social structure. With increasing tribal organization, the power of military leaders increased, and changes in tactics, armor, weapons and riding equipment (the metal stirrup) all led to women being excluded from a military role in Sarmatian society.

**Proto- Slavs:** Proto-Slavic society was matriarchal, and based social equality. Cooperation between large families, and a basic democratic structure prevented the concentration of power, political or economic, in the hands of any group or person.

### POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

#### **Kievan Rus:**

In Kievan Rus, the early Russian Law gave men the highest and most powerful position in the social strata since they hunted, fought, and dominated religious and political life. But, women also engaged in agriculture, worked in the harvest, gathered forest products, weaving, and, when necessary, they even fought to defend their cities. Women controlled their children, their family property, dowry and wealth, and could purchase land and perform charity works.

During Kievan Russia, women enjoyed considerable freedom and independence, both legally and socially which was the remnant of the matriarchal tradition of the Proto-Slavs. In the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century there was a

women ruler, and the first Kievan women ruler was Olga, who took power in 962 after her husband's murder, but prevalence of women rulers disappeared until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Princess Olga also was the first woman who travelled to Constantinople and converted to Christianity.

After the conversion to Christianity in 988, the rights of women were not forgotten. While sometimes women's influence over individual male lives was perceived, women also received negative reactions, were blamed for natural disasters regarded as the "devil's vessel" and were even killed.

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

### **Muscovite Rus:**

**Segregation of Women in Terem:** In contrast to Kievan Rus, the Muscovite state segregated men and women. The position of women in the Muscovite state was one of complete subjugation to men. Women were deprived of any freedom and they were forced to live in segregation.

The Muscovite royal women lived in a separate women's quarters known as the *Terem*. Upper-class women enjoyed some freedom in the sense that they could own property, manage their own estates and even arrange marriages. The Tsar's wives and daughters had an important public role in dispensing charity, receiving petitions and standing in when men were absent. Elite women were allowed out using curtained recesses in church and closed carriages for outside.

The main task of royal women was to give birth to an heir to the throne and to raise children. No women were allowed in the tsar's formal receptions. Women's portraits scarcely permissible at all outside of a religious context.

There was no seclusion for ordinary townswomen who contributed to household incomes. In the countryside, peasant women worked alongside their men; while the men sowed, women dealt with the reaping.

**High illiteracy:** Illiteracy was very high among both men and women. Even the majority of noble women in the empire remained illiterate, and education was not considered important. In the *Domostroy* (house manual) written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the rules on education had no reference to women. "The Wife was always and in all things to take Counsel with her Husband". There were a few private schools for girls, but they never learned how to read and write there, they only studied household management techniques.

**Life out of Terem:** It was Peter the Great who abolished the *Terem*, and encouraged the social mixing of the sexes and the wearing of Western clothing. During the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the petrine reforms made the education of women an increasingly important issue. In order to create a Western nation, Peter ordered the wives of his nobility to join in weekly assemblies or parties at noble homes, to participate in public ceremonies, and to dance, drink, and play cards at court parties.

**Law of Succession:** Another reform that Peter the Great introduced was a change in the law of succession, which allowed women to rule for most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1722 Peter issued a decree stating that each emperor should choose his own heir. After his death, empresses ruled Russia for the next seventy years.

**Schools for Girls:** Catherine the Great established girls' schools, including a teacher's college and a school for noble girls called the Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg, and more noble women received finishing-school education at these female institutions. She also authorized the creation of a school for maidens, the Novodevichy Institute which was situated in a Moscow convent.

As a proponent of the Enlightenment, Catherine II believed that noble women should be educated and take an active role in the development of Russian culture, and among Russian intellectuals. Everywhere in the Empire, noble girls were educated, primarily by tutors hired by their parents, took an interest in the arts, played musical instruments, attended plays, and drew sketches of the countryside. Like Peter the Great,

Catherine also encouraged women to join in weekly salon assemblies in their homes to debate political questions or talk about the arts.

**Property rights:** The property rights of Russian noble women were protected in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the law of 1753. This law allowed married women to control their own property, and the dowry property they had brought into the marriage. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women also participated in court sessions, could sell their own property, and sign their own names on sales contracts.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

Russia remained an overwhelmingly patriarchal society in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women's main duties remained the same. Women were expected to be traditional wives, and should devote themselves to their families and household jobs.

**Russian Law of 1836:** According to the Code of Russian Laws of 1836 "the woman must obey her husband, reside with him in love, respect, and in unlimited obedience...". Women were forced to marry against their wills, but were able to control any dowry property. These property rights were not given to peasant women.

**Intellectuals and the issue of women:** Reform-minded women intellectuals began to participate in political life which was one of the most important developments of the Nikolai I era, but the foundation for this participation was laid by Catherine II.

During Alexander II's reign, Russian intellectuals brought up the issue of "the woman question" and they emphasized that women should be given the same education as men, because they were "equal beings." During this period two novels, Ivan Turgenev's *On the Eve* (1860) and Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) were both answers to the woman question. Both novels depicted young women who left their parents and in order to devote themselves to doing something useful for society.

**Feminism:** The discussion around the woman question in the 1860s resulted in the appearance of the feminist movement in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other provincial cities that was led by Filosofova, Stasova and Trubnikova. They dedicated themselves to helping poor urban women and improving education for girls.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Women's participation in economic and social life:** Women began to participate in the economic and social developments of the last decades of imperial Russia. Noblewomen and feminists organized charities and persuaded the government to provide women with higher education. However, these changes excluded peasant and working-class women although they made up 80 percent of the female population and played a crucial role in industrialization. Many male workers did not even want to work with women in the factories, thinking that women would bring down wages and cost men jobs. Women were never allowed to obtain leadership in the factories. Even the female textile workers' union had male leadership. Starting in 1905, women were out on the street participating in strikes, demonstrations, and taking active role in the Soviets.

The Russian Revolution began in February 1917 with a demonstration staged by women congregating on the Nevsky Prospekt in Petrograd, and the slogans on their banners demanded change. Hundreds of women came out of their factories and men joined in their protests on that day in 1917 which came to be known as the Women's Day March.

On February 23, textile workers poured into the streets to protest shortages of bread and the war that had cost so many men's lives. There were around one million female workers living in Russia's cities who were paid half the wages of men and treated unequally. The revolution brought many women into politics, and they began to demand women's equality.

**Zhenotdel:** Women went to work in the new government and in the military. The Bolsheviks established the women's department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (Zhenotdel) to educate women and promoted the establishment of female internships. In 1930's women made up 13 percent of the total party membership. By 1939 about four-fifths of females were literate, and the number of women completing secondary and higher education continued to increase.

**Industrialization:** Between 1929 and 1935, 1.7 million women were working as industrial wage earners. Although Stalin's rapid industrialization opened up new career opportunities for women, in 1943 women made up 53 percent of industrial workers and in 1945, 92 percent of agricultural workers were women.

**Women at the front:** There were also around 70.000 women enlisted in the Red Army during the Civil War and World War I; some women fought in battles, but many of them served in non-combative positions, such as medical or clerical positions. In 1920, the Soviets provided for the political and legal equality of women, and removed marriage from church control and made it a civil matter. However, male soldiers did not want to be with women at the front. They believed that women were not strong enough to handle the stresses of war, that they brought bad luck and destroyed friendships.

**Inequality returns after war:** Towards the end of World War II, after the government's stress on the importance of women in domestic jobs, some women had to yield their jobs to returning men in the countryside, where men reclaimed their leadership positions on the collective farms. The percentage of women working as heavy machine operators dropped from 55 percent in 1943 to 5 percent in 1949.

However, women's participation in public institutions and activities continued. Women began to appear in fields that previously had been predominantly male. There were women officers, managers, physicians, farmers, engineers, economists, faculty members, journalists, writers, editors, and visual and performing artists by the late 1930s. But, as in the past, women had lower incomes than men and very few were promoted into the top ranks of their fields.

**Obshchestvennitsa (women's volunteer movement):** A voluntary movement called *Obshchestvennitsa* operated between 1934 and 1941, in which thousands of wives of military officers provided supplies to cafeterias, childcare centers, dormitories, and medical clinics in the factories and regiments to improve living conditions and bring culture. Some supervised cooks, put up curtains, taught hygiene, planted trees, organized day-care centers etc. Others organized into control brigades and inspected retail shops for cleanliness and good customer service.

After Stalin died, life improved for millions of Soviet women. The programs for providing better funding for social services and education continued. Many women began to appear in middle management position in government institutions and in other professions, and wages increased.

**Zhensovet (women's soviets):** During Khrushchev more women were appointed to government committees and regional soviets (*zhensovet*) to improve their communities. He authorized the establishment of a training program for female cosmonauts.

**Second-wave feminism:** Brezhnev believed that the outcomes of the double shift undesirable in that it not only limited women's productivity in their jobs but also caused them to have small families. Brezhnev believed that they needed to increase the productivity of labor and the growth of the population to keep up in the Cold War's arms race.

The second wave of feminism that revived in America in the 1960s advocated a more egalitarian style of life. In order Soviet accomplishments to show the world, Brezhnev encouraged journalists and scholars to publicize women's achievements. Women's presence in administrative and managerial positions increased. In the 1970s, there were thousands of doctors, judges, scientists, professors, architects etc. Female membership in the party was 26.5 percent in 1981.

**Soviet Women's Committee:** During Gorbachev, there was criticism of the double shift, and he also promised to improve social services, creating social science study groups to discuss women's problems. The *Soviet Women's Committee (Zhensovety)* represented Russia at international conferences and meetings. *Zhensovety* was brought under the leadership of the *Committee*.

**Women in politics:** During the last decades of the Soviet Union, only 16 percent of candidates elected to the Congress of People's Deputies were women. Gorbachev appointed one of the female party officials to the Politburo, and he also chose economic and sociologic female advisors. Women had been active in political life since the beginning of the Revolution of 1917, but women were most active in political life and women's organizations after the 1980s. However, they did not become a members of any political party. They were able to vote to support candidates, join strikes and demonstrations, give petitions etc. In 1991 they even showed resistance to the to the coup attempted in August 1991.

### **Discussion/Questions**

1. Why was Muscovite women's life confined and their public life so limited? Why did the state exercise such strict control over them?
2. Why did the promotion of women in public life slow down during Stalin?
3. Women's rights were one of the most divisive issues, a source of conflict during WWII in the Soviet Union. Why did the Soviet government limit women's rights after the war?
4. Women appeared in all classes, both inside the family and in the workplace during the Soviet Union. But, why were Soviet leaders were against double shift? Did this policy contradict their stated support for gender equality?

### **Reading**

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