Gender Role and Expectations for the Future of Young Russian Women

Kathleen Richter

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The influence of the West on countries like Russia, Japan and other countries is huge. Not only does it influence the demand for western products, it also changes ways of life, points of view and behavior of other cultures. For example, big cities in Russia, such as St. Petersburg and Moscow, show significant western influence. Russian culture has a rich historical, social, and personal background, but it has changed over the years along with the citizens and their expectations of their lifestyle and future. I will observe in this research paper more closely the expectations of young Russian women about their future as well as on their role in Russian society. In order to analyze the changes of Russian women's lifestyle and role in Russia, I interviewed Russian women from Moscow and St. Petersburg, one of the most popular and largest cities in Russia. The women who participated in the research are part of two different generations. The research focused first on a group of women who grew up in the former Soviet Union, and the second group were women who are in their mid-twenties or even younger, but with a high school education. Furthermore, artifacts from Russian literature as well as personal observations will help to analyze the development of women’s roles in Russia. This study challenges the idea that a big country like Russia cannot avoid the influence of the West and cannot protect the old traditions as well as expectations for the younger generation. The leading question of this research paper is: How did Russian female roles change from the 20th century to the 21st century, and how do young Russian women between the ages of 18 and 25 see their own life and future in
To get to the answer of this research question, we have to take a closer look at what happened before modern times. A critical time in Russian history is the period of the Soviet Union, which lasted from 1922 until 1991. Before the Soviet Union got established by the Bolsheviks, Russia experienced many revolutions because the Russian lower classes were suffering from hunger and bad living conditions under the regime of the Tsar. Russia was ruled for about six hundred years by Tsars, which is the Russian version of a king or emperor. A cluster of many revolutions in 1917 forced Tsar Peter I to renounce his power and position in the Russian empire. A new governance system was later established with Russia being governed by a single party, the communist party. In 1922 this communist party, led by the Bolsheviks, began forming the Soviet Union with Lenin as their leader. Stalin entered office 1922, and he tried to establish a central planed economy following the ideals of Marxism and Leninism. This led to industrialization, in which more people moved into the cities for jobs, and mass production led to higher production rates and a more efficient way of providing enough necessities to the population. These industrial changes and improvements of the Russian economy were interrupted during World War II, during which Russia waged war against Germany starting in 1941. After World War II ended, the Soviet Union annexed more areas to its East. Many technological achievements followed in the 20th century, e.g. the first satellite, and following World War II the Soviet Union was seen as equally powerful as America. Once Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, he unleashed a revolution, called glasnost and perestroika to stop economic stagnation and to institute more democracy. Gorbachev’s plan did not work out this way, and people were suffering from lack of food and basic necessities, which was the reason why they forced Gorbachev to
abdicate, thereby ending the Soviet period.[2]

Role of the Russian women in Soviet Union

Image 1: Soviet propaganda of the working women.[3]

The economic situation during Soviet times did not serve the citizens very well. Russians endured food shortages and lack of basic needs on the market. A successful agriculture system is not possible in the country of Russia because of non-ideal weather and climate circumstances. In the north, the climate is too cold, and in the south, is it too warm. It is neither possible to conduct agriculture in the ice or desert, nor is it easy to have a successful harvest if the rain comes at the wrong time which often happens in the central area between the ice and desert, which is the most fertile region in Russia. Russia has not and still is not able to provide enough food for its citizens because even this fertile region is occupied by big forests.[4] Many shortages of food also occurred in the Soviet Union although a central tenant of a communist state is to provide and produce for its citizens and therefore benefit the entire economy. Furthermore, Russia lost many men during World War II fighting the Germans on the Eastern Front. Back home women had to fulfil the working positions that the men had left behind, but this continued after the war as many soldiers did not return. The Soviet Union portrayed Russian
women as strong, hard-working, and loyal to their state. Many propaganda posters show this kind of image even at the time of the early Soviet Union, like one can see in image 1. It shows women in the soviet working uniform, holding the crop and looking secure and stout. This kind of advertisement was made to assure that the economy kept running and to bring the economical development forward despite a lack of men through the labor of women. Another indicator that the women took over the male position in Soviet Russia is a part of a Soviet song:

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"Я и лошадь,
я и бык,
Я и баба,
и мужик."
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Image 2: Soviet song[4]

In English it means: “I'm a horse, I'm an ox, I'm a woman, and a man.” This part of the soviet song shows the role of the women after the second World War and during the Soviet time. Russian women had to work hard like an animal, and they were expected to fill in for the men in the workforce, but at the same time fulfill their duty as a woman and mother. Women worked on the fields, in the industry, and in other male positions. Women did work, but it was not necessarily their choice; they had to work because of increasing economical pressure. Without any work, their family would not have been able to survive. In many cases, the woman was the single earner and provider in the family. Women were so busy working and keeping their family alive that this concept of motivating the Russian women to take the place of the working man had a major consequence, the birthrate in Russia declined. Russian women had to fulfill their duties as working women and could not afford being a mother and staying at home.[5][6] One might think that the Soviet woman was seen as an equal to the Soviet man because she
had to do the same work and often served as the position of a male provider for her family.\(^{[7]}\) And also the Soviet constitution from 1977 declared that men and women have equal rights: this law provided the soviet women with the same rights for education, employment, and participation in social, cultural, and political activities. Still the reality was different, and most Soviet women did not enjoy the same position then men. Women frequently performed the same work or even more arduous work than men, but were payed less. Men entered leading positions while women remained doing the difficult and dirty work at the bottom of the career ladder.\(^{[8][9]}\) The Russian government focused however on the problem of the declining birth rate and also started to focus on the role of a mother and wife as being part of the ideal soviet woman while at the same time keeping the emphasis on the importance of the soviet women as a valuable laborer. Despite the soviet woman having both a major role in the domestic and working spheres of life, Russian women were never portrayed in such a positive way even though their role was ideal for the communist state.\(^{[10]}\) Despite the lingering aspects of inequality, the Bolsheviks transformed the role of the Russian woman towards a more independent female in comparison with the pre-soviet traditional female roles lacking in any real equal relationship with men. This new image of the female role did not necessarily benefit these women. They now had to live up to this ideal image of the perfect soviet woman that was a huge burden to fulfill due to their newly increased duties in society and the workforce. The characteristics of an ideal soviet woman is portrayed on the propaganda poster in image 2.
This propaganda poster shows the expectations the government placed on the Russian women. A Soviet woman should have many children to ensure a stable birthrate; the more people a country has, the stronger it is in case of defense. Furthermore the two women in the upper corners of the poster show women in working roles wearing uniforms. This shows how soviet society emphasized a woman’s role both as loving mother and valuable laborer.

*Perspectives and Experiences of Women in the 20th century in Soviet Union*

In my interviews I talked to women who were mothers and workers when they lived in the Soviet Union. I asked them general questions about their living conditions. The questions I asked produced similar answers from all of the 10 interviewed women, which originated from Moscow and St. Petersburg. All of them no longer had a husband for reasons of both natural death and divorce. None of them, irregardless of the age when they became widowed or divorce, remarried or were involved in a serious relationship with another man again. All of them had children with most of them still living with them or in some cases grandchilden all together in an apartment. Eighty percent of the interviewed former soviet women had a university or equally high educational degree and worked their whole life until retirement. All of them reached their independence from their families when they got married and moved into their own home in their residing city with an average age of 20. As I asked the question whether they felt treated unequally as women during the soviet times, all of them negated inequality. None of them had problems finding an apartment as a single women, nor did they experience
disadvantages in their jobs. Although some of them mentioned that their male coworkers received higher pay than they did, the working women were seen equal to men and were treated with respect.

The Change from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation

In December 1991 the Soviet Union reached its end. Gorbachev abdicated his office and a day later the red Soviet flag with the hammer and sickle was replaced by the white, blue, red-colored Russian Federation flag. Russia dissolved into fifteen post-soviet states; the newly elected president was Boris Yeltsin. After the fall of the Soviet Union the rates of registered marriages decreased along with the birth rate. A major reason for this acute change was a shift in the image Russians had of women. In the Soviet Union, women represented the image of a working mother, and in the Russian Federation women were displayed in a more superficial way. Western influence loosened up the strict role where women must be a mother and labor provider. Women started to focus on their appearance and saw western women as their role model. The image of a mother and communist worker was exchanged for the Russian woman who is seen as a sexual object. This image of the traditional housewife, who put more emphasis on appearance, played a much bigger role in the period after the end of the communist era due to the new influence from the West. Despite this more superficial aspect of the new Russian woman, young women started to put a lot more emphasis on higher education and the hope for better and higher career possibilities. All these changes occurred during great changes in Russian society, attitudes and behaviors due to economic changes and westernization. These factors also led to a partial breakdown of the family with an increasing rate of divorce and a higher number of children born outside of marriage. Exactly when these changes occurred is difficult to determine because attitudes during the Soviet period are difficult to ascertain. At the same time, I observed that Russian people tend to avoid talking about politics and problems in Russia.
I asked Russians why they dislike to talk about problems in their country and within the government, and I always received the same answer, “We are just not interested”. Only one girl was willing to talk about it and gave me some clear information. Not surprisingly she studied law in Boston Massachusetts for three years, and this western influence was probably a major reason why she was more open and willing to talk about political issues and to answer my question about why Russians do not like to talk about politics and problems in their country. She told me that Russia has many conflicts and receives regular criticism from foreign countries. Furthermore, most Russians grow up with the fact that Russia has many problems as a fact of life: they get used to hearing about Russia’s many political, economic, and historical problems. Hearing about these issues their whole life numbs them and they try to ignore it because they can only deal with a limited amount of criticism and difficulties of their society. Such a situation could lead to depression for many people and this could explain why so many Russians have drinking problems. However this interesting topic is not a central topic of this research paper.

In the post-soviet era women were and still are mainly in charge of the household and the children. This stereotypical role has not changed since the fall of the Soviet Union. In the interviews the research subjects confirmed the image that the women should take care of the children and the household. Russian males in the interviews, however, claimed they would do the household as well if the woman has no time because of her job, but this answer seemed shallow throughout my observations in their homes. It often appeared that the mother, grandmother, wife, or the girlfriend always prepared the food and stayed home to take care of the household no matter their age. This shows that the separation of duties within the family is still largely traditional in Russian society.