Chapter 5

Emancipation and Equality

Women's emancipation and sexual equality were concepts central, in theory at least, to the Bolshevik revolutionary project. A number of radical policy initiatives were introduced after October 1917 that presented a direct challenge to tsarist patriarchal practices, some of which were deeply embedded in Russian culture, reflecting in part the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as those of other religious authorities. These early post-revolutionary changes included the introduction of civil procedures for the registration of marriage, an extensive liberalisation of the terms under which couples could be granted a divorce and, in 1920, Soviet Russia became the first country in the world to legalise abortion, albeit on health grounds rather than as a 'woman's right to choose'. Women in the Russian empire had already been granted the right to vote by the Provisional Government during the summer of 1917, before the Bolsheviks came to power, and the new Soviet government made great efforts after October to encourage women to take an active part in public life and to hold public office. As a consequence, the early Soviet period often evoked a romantic spirit in young revolutionary women who firmly believed they were contributing to building a future society based on equality.[1]

Women's equality with men soon came to be enshrined in different areas of the law and in the Soviet family and labour codes. The civil registration of marriage did away with the notion of a wife agreeing to 'love, honour and obey' her husband. The 1926 Family Law

[1] See Masha Gessen, *Two Babushkas: How My Grandmothers Survived Hitler's War and Stalin's Peace*, London: Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 34.

presumed equality between the sexes. Women could no longer be forced to marry or to remain married against their will. The practices of abducting women for the purposes of marriage and of the payment of bride price – evident particularly in the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus – were outlawed, though they continued in evidence. The 1926 law gave married couples equal rights and responsibilities in relation to children and to any property acquired after marriage, which offered some protection to non-working women if the couple decided to divorce.[2] A husband could no longer determine where his wife should live, thus doing away with centuries long cohabitation requirements. The 1926 law also, significantly, offered the same protection to couples living together in *de facto* marital relationships (in joint cohabitation) as it did to couples who officially registered their marriage.

The equality between women and men was also embedded in article 122 of the 1936 (Stalin) Soviet Constitution:

---

[2] Rudolph Schlesinger, *The Family in the USSR: Changing Attitudes in Soviet Russia*, London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1949, pp. 154-68. The 1926 Family Law is also available online: http://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/archive/marriage.htm (accessed April 2018). For the debates surrounding the introduction of the law, and its still 'conservative' underpinnings, see Beatrice Brodsky Farnsworth, 'Bolshevik Alternatives and the Soviet Family: the 1926 Marriage Law Debate', in Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus (eds), *Women in Russia*, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978, pp. 139-65; Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, ch. 6.

> Women in the USSR are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, government, cultural, political and other public activity.
>
> The possibility of exercising these rights is ensured by women being accorded an equal right with men to work, payment for work, rest and leisure, social insurance and education, and by state protection of the interests of mother and child, state aid to mothers of large families and unmarried mothers, maternity leave with full pay, and the provision of a wide network of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens.[3]

These provisions were reiterated, with some slight adjustments, in article 35 of the 1977 Soviet Constitution introduced under Brezhnev:

> Women and men have equal rights in the USSR.
>
> Exercise of these rights is ensured according women equal access with men to education and vocational and professional training, equal opportunities in employment, remuneration and promotion, and in social and political and cultural activity, and by special labour and health protection measures for women; by providing conditions enabling mothers to work; by legal protection, and material and moral support for mothers

[3] *Women and Communism: Selections from the Writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1950, p. 49. A full version of the 1936 Constitution is available online: https://constitutii.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/1936-en.pdf (accessed November 2017).

and children, including paid leaves and other benefits for expectant mothers and gradual reduction of working time for mothers with small children.[4]

Such legal initiatives and constitutional guarantees, however, were not sufficient on their own to overturn long-held ideas about women's position in society, their role within the family, their standing in the workplace or their ability to hold public office. During its existence, a number of specialist organisations were established in the Soviet Union with the explicit remit to promote women's emancipation and sexual equality and to encourage women's active participation in the public sphere. The first and most prestigious of these, the *Zhenotdel* (*zhenskii otdel*; women's department), was established soon after the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917. It organised campaigns throughout Soviet territories in the 1920s, tackling illiteracy amongst women, engaging them in electoral campaigns, and taking part in an ill-thought-out unveiling campaign in the Central Asian republics from the late 1920s. By the end of the decade, however, the work of the *Zhenotdel* was deemed to have been completed and the organisation was closed down in 1930. A superficial veneer of equality had been laid in Soviet society by the end of the 1920s, sufficient for one contemporary British observer to note that 'here women are accepted as the equals of men in every respect', especially considering the advances in women's higher education since 1917.[5]

---

[4] *Soviet Legislation on Women's Rights: Collection of Normative Acts*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 28. A full version of the 1977 Constitution is available online: http://www.constitution.org/cons/ussr77.txt (accessed November 2017).

[5] Lucie Street (ed.), *I Married a Russian: Letters from Kharkov*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1946, pp. 146-7.

An active campaign to engage women in the public sphere was revived under Khrushchev as part of his promotion of participatory politics in the late 1950s. This included the establishment of grassroots women's councils, *zhensovety*, throughout the country. The *zhensovety* continued in existence, with varying degrees of success, right through to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.[6] In addition, articles about women's emancipation and sexual equality appeared regularly in women's magazines, in the broader Soviet press and in specialist academic journals. An international seminar, under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women was convened in Moscow in 1956 to debate the issue.[7] Emerging out of the Soviet Women's Anti-Fascist Committee that had been formed at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1941, the Soviet Union also established its own Committee of Soviet Women in 1956.

Contemporary Reflections on Equality:

The extent and limits to which the Soviet mantra of sexual equality was internalised and accepted without question by women themselves is reflected in some of the statements included in the narratives used for this study. Geneticist Raissa Berg's commentary suggests that, at least during the early years of the Soviet regime, issues of social class came to trump those of gender: at university in Leningrad in the early 1930s, 'neither the administration, nor

---

[6] For further detail, see Melanie Ilic, 'What Did Women Want? Khrushchev and the Revival of the *Zhensovety*', in Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (eds), *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 104-21.

[7] L. Petrova and S. Gilevskaya (comps), *Equality of Women in the USSR: Materials of International Seminar (Moscow, September 15 – October 1, 1956)*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957.

the students themselves strove for equality'.[8] Whilst many of her male contemporaries were seemingly drawn from the peasantry or the working class, her female classmates were largely from the intelligentsia, leading Berg to question if this was pure coincidence or the outcome of women's lesser mobility.[9] Similarly, Raisa Orlova's youthful concerns about equality appear to have been much more to do with social class than gender. She did not want to be considered rich, or even seemingly well-to-do in her own life, carrying an on-going feeling of shame at her relative prosperity. She was very critical of the 'monstrous inequality' that pervaded post-war Soviet society's 'new class', and she also came to recognise the positioning of Russians as 'first amongst equals' in Soviet society.[10] Nadezhda Mandelstam similarly preferred to be a 'beggar', because being rich 'always smacked of blood and treachery'.[11]

Not all were blind to the contemporary gender inequalities. Suzanne Rosenberg noted that 'women's emancipation was an empty phrase' for the woman with whom she was living in the early 1930s; this mother spent her days queuing for food, finding ingenious ways of cooking it, washing and cleaning, whilst the men around her 'indulged themselves as they pleased'.[12] It is also important to note that legislative enactments did little to change men's

---

[8] Raissa L. Berg, *Acquired Traits: Memoirs of a Geneticist from the Soviet Union*, London: Penguin, 1988, p. 19

[9] Berg, *Acquired Traits*, p. 18.

[10] Raisa Orlova, *Memoirs*, trans. by Samuel Cioran, New York: Random House, 1983, pp. 58-9, 153, 173, 197.

[11] Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Abandoned: a Memoir*, trans. by Max Heywood, London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1974, p. 397.

[12] Suzanne Rosenberg, *A Soviet Odyssey*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 38.

long-standing attitudes towards women. Mary Leder implies a level of general disrespect for women evident in Russian men's 'brand of prudishness combined with lewdness'.[13]

In her teens in the early 1930s, cynical diarist Nina Lugovskaya (born in 1918) did not really understand what it meant to be a Soviet woman, and she astutely observed that the aim of the Bolshevik emancipation campaign was essentially centred on the intention to make women more like men, but also that this was unlikely to succeed:

> And what is a woman? A woman is a dog who tries to rise to the level of her master, to occupy the same position as him, but can't get there. What is the liberation of women? It's a mirage, nothing more than a hallucination.[14]

In fact, the youthful Lugovskaya proved to be an unwitting and interesting critic of the implementation of the Soviet emancipation agenda whilst still in her teens in the 1930s. She questioned how women were supposed to get to know themselves when they had no suitable role models presented to them in the literature they read in school, with male writers examining women almost exclusively from their own perspective: 'they don't know what we're like'.[15] She also sensed rather keenly that the boys and men around her, including particularly her own father, viewed women disparagingly and she clearly resented being

---

[13] Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: an American Woman Looks Back*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 173.

[14] Nina Lugovskaya, *I Want to Live: the Diary of a Young Girl in Stalin's Russia*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield, London: Doubleday, 2006, p. 62. The book's translator suggests that Nina's comments are ironic, but I'm not so sure.

[15] Lugovskaya, *I Want to Live*, pp. 68-9.

expected to attend to their needs above her own.[16] Yet she was no less critical of the 'brazen and never embarrassed' examples of the new Soviet woman, 'very inelegant and in vulgar taste', that she saw around herself on the streets of Moscow.[17] Likewise, the girls she knew at school idled away their time, talking nonsense and gossiping about boys, whilst she herself wanted to avoid being seen as empty headed.[18] In her final analysis, Lugovskaya astutely questioned whether equality was something to be granted to women by men, or something that women themselves should strive to achieve.[19]

As was regularly observed and sometimes noted, despite the work of centrally-endorsed organisations for the promotion of women's emancipation and what was written in the statute books, Soviet proclamations on sexual equality were not always reflected in daily practice. As one interviewee noted, 'Equality is written into the law, although the law is seldom invoked'.[20] Moreover, as Tamara Adamova Kolb-Chernashova (future wife of American journalist Eddy Gilmore) pointed out, 'Russia is, I think, a patriarchy. By law woman is man's equal, but in fact I am not quite so sure'.[21] She points out that by the 1960s Soviet newspapers were debating the coarsening of Soviet women and the physical harm done to them by their extensive employment in heavy physical labour; that it was still the father's

---

[16] Various comments made in Lugovskaya, *I Want to Live*, pp. 73-75.

[17] Lugovskaya, *I Want to Live*, p. 194.

[18] Lugovskaya, *I Want to Live*, p. 208.

[19] Lugovskaya, *I Want to Live*, p. 236.

[20] Lyuba, in Carola Hansson and Karin Liden (eds), *Moscow Women: Thirteen Interviews*, London: Allison and Busby, 1980, p. 152.

[21] Tamara Gilmore, *Me and My American Husband*, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1968, p. 20.

position that was most honoured in the Soviet family, with sons being more cherished than daughters; and that the upper echelons of Soviet office-holding remained dominated by men. She was far from alone in her observations.[22]

For Bolshevik policy-makers, women's emancipation was thought principally to lie in their economic independence through their individual wage-earning capacity, so that women would no longer have to be reliant on men for their day-to-day subsistence. Soviet women were to be drawn into the paid labour force, and revolutionary ideals envisaged the communal provision of a whole range of household and family management tasks that were usually the sole responsibility of women to perform in their own homes, including childcare, food preparation and the laundry. The realities of post-revolutionary economic and material shortages, coupled to some extent also with a lack of political will on the part of the government to implement such radical proposals, however, meant that everyday circumstances often fell considerably short of the ideal, leaving women with a hefty 'double burden' of paid labour outside the home and unpaid labour within it; this became a 'triple burden' once children appeared on the scene.

The Domestic Division of Labour:

As has also been regularly observed, the attempts by the Soviet government to draw women into paid employment and public life were not counterbalanced by strategies to encourage men to take a greater role in household management and childcare in the domestic sphere. In the still revolutionary 1920s, even women were encouraged to turn their backs on household

[22] On the favouring of boys, see also Lugovskaya, *I Want to Live*, p. 74.

'slavery', and many would not waste their time on housework.[23] Nevertheless, someone had to take responsibility for running a household, and this was usually the woman. As a number of women soon discovered, the Soviet rhetoric of equality did not extend to their private life in the home: 'there's equality on the social level. Women have the same basic rights and freedoms as men do … but no laws are strong enough to penetrate the family'.[24] This late Soviet interviewee believed that the psychological differences between women and men are too great to allow for complete equality and, as she pointed out, family life cannot be changed by decrees.[25]

Nina Markovna's observation of couples walking on the streets of Moscow perhaps provides a broader visual indicator of the everyday inequalities that shaped women's everyday lives: whilst men's arms were hanging freely, women's hands were used for carrying shopping bags and holding on to children.[26] This observation can be further extended in the example of how women tended to spend their breaks at work, as one interviewee pointed out: 'We only had one break of 45 minutes during the day. The men would go to lunch, but I usually went shopping to buy food during that time'.[27] On the use of time in the workplace and the

[23] See the example provided by Anya von Bremzen, *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking: a Memoir of Food and Longing*, London: Doubleday, 2013, pp. 26, 49, of her two 'New Soviet women' grandmothers who did not cook, and with a preference for reading instead.

[24] Natasha, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 174.

[25] Natasha, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, pp. 174-5.

[26] Nina Markovna, *Nina's Journey: a Memoir of Stalin's Russia and the Second World War*, Washington, DC: Regenery Gateway, 1989, p. 121.

[27] Irina Fedorovna Vainstein, in Melanie Ilic, *Life Stories of Soviet Women: the Interwar Generation*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 97.

occasional availability of scarce products in the workplace canteen, another commentator notes wryly that 'It's no wonder that we calculate the effectiveness of the workday by the amount of products we buy. And here we have true equality. Professor and cleaning woman are equally happy to buy a stick of sausage'.[28] Mary Leder noted that, at the Moscow factory where she was placed in the early 1930s and from her observations later in the decade, married women rushed out of work at the end of the day to queue for food, collect their children from day care, return home to cook, clean and do housework chores late into the evening, before repeating the whole routine the next day.[29]

Soviet time-budget surveys, conducted in the 1920s and 1950s, provided clear indicators of how women and men spent their days differently. In general, whilst men tended to spend marginally more time a day on paid labour during the working week, women did significantly more unpaid work around the house, had less leisure time and fewer hours of sleep. The unequal distribution of labour in the domestic sphere was an aspect of their everyday experience that some women came to recognise as a significant source of inequality in their private lives.[30]

This was something recognised also as a feature of even the most loyal male Communist Party members, as one daughter noted: 'Like many Communists, my father's belief in equality for women was not carried into the life of his own home', and whilst he regularly

---

[28] Elena Romine, *The Intimate Diary of a Russian Woman: My Search for Meaning in the Midst of my Country's Upheaval*, trans. by Antonina W. Bouis, New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1992, p. 107.

[29] Leder, *My Life*, pp. 44, 168.

[30] Sonya, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 61.

went out to meetings, his wife stayed at home to look after the children.[31] In one example of a man carrying out domestic tasks beyond what would normally be expected of him ('Men fixed things. Men did "heavy" work'), he took care that this 'woman's work' should not be witnessed by others in the shared spaces of the communal apartment. Furthermore, although this husband had no problems in providing material support for his wife when she was unable to work, he did not like to receive material support from her when he was later unable to find paid employment.[32]

Housework itself was something identified as a long-term impediment to women's progress. It was, in fact, so routine and expected that Nadezhda Mandelstam observed that 'our women never count the cost of their own work'.[33] Despite the often inadequate level of public services provided by the state, one interviewee suggested that Soviet women had become so accustomed not to think for themselves that they tended to delegate responsibility to the government to take care of them.[34] In Soviet fiction, the work-life balance burdens of Soviet women's everyday lives and the limited role of state assistance are graphically portrayed in Natal'ya Baranskaya's novella *Nedelya kak nedelya* (*A Week Like Any Other*), published in 1968.

---

[31] Hilda Bernstein, *Separation*, London: Corvo, 2003, p. 7. On debates about the domestic division of labour amongst the revolutionary underground, see Katy Turton, *Family Networks and the Russian Revolutionary Movement*, 1870-1940, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 57-66.

[32] Leder, *My Life*, pp. 166, 168, 287.

[33] Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope: a Memoir,* trans. by Max Hayward, London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1971, p. 335.

[34] Tanya, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, pp. 183-4.

In contrast, another interviewee considered complaints about the unequal division of labour in the home to be largely a problem of 'big cities'. In rural households, there was more than enough work to be done which meant that everybody had to take part, and this included women in tasks requiring heavy labour. Housework was viewed in this case as something that should be negotiated between husband and wife and that one task could easily be reciprocated with another. Nevertheless, she claimed that emancipation was 'part of our style of life', and that 'women have finally gotten the emancipation they're entitled to. … It's had an enormous psychological significance!'[35]

The Bolshevik's legal framework and the progressive initiatives adopted after the October revolution were, indeed, lofty proclamations, and in many respects the ideological underpinnings of the emancipation project and the policies introduced by the Soviet regime after 1917 brought about some very real changes and improvements to women's everyday lives. Many women willingly and eagerly grasped the opportunities opened up for them by the Soviet regime, and the Soviet Union was, for much of its early existence at least, looked upon as the model for women's emancipation by many other countries around the world. Yet how did Soviet women themselves come to understand the concepts of emancipation and equality as they played out in their everyday lives?

Benefits of the Soviet System:

The Soviet system offers many examples of progressive employment and welfare policies targeted specifically towards women, especially in terms of their attempts to combine

[35] Nadezhda Pavlovna, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, pp. 87, 91-2.

motherhood with paid employment. Providing the officially-endorsed line of thinking, Raisa Gorbacheva claimed in the late 1980s that 'the right to equal pay for equal work, to material and social independence and to fulfil oneself as an individual – all this represents a tremendous achievement by the women of our day', and she pointed to the opinion polls conducted in the late Soviet period which indicated that most Soviet women would not want to give up work completely even if their household income would allow them to do so.[36] Paid work, then, was a central aspect of the vast majority of Soviet women's everyday life, and most Soviet women attempted to combine their obligations to work with caring for children and the wider family on limited budgets and with inadequate support provided by the state.

At the same time, in acknowledging the shortfalls of the Soviet system, Raisa Gorbacheva framed these in a global context: 'The conditions affecting women's work and its payment, and the state's support for the family, in the Soviet Union, to put it mildly, leave much to be desired'.[37] Even towards the end of the Soviet period, she noted that 'the country was still not able to create the necessary conditions for realizing Soviet women's equality in practice and for the assertion of her human dignity with full rights'.[38] Part of this failure she attributed to the need to raise social awareness and to change public opinion on the status of the family in order to challenge the devaluation of women's roles as wife and mother.

---

[36] R.M. Gorbacheva, *Ya nadeyus'*…, Moscow: Novosti, 1991, p. 130; see also Raisa Gorbachev, *I Hope: Reminiscences and Reflections*, trans. by David Floyd, London: Fontana, 1992, pp. 103-4.

[37] Gorbacheva, *Ya nadeyus'*…, pp. 131-2; Gorbachev, *I Hope*, p. 104.

[38] Gorbacheva, *Ya nadeyus'*…, pp. 197-8; Gorbachev, *I Hope*, p. 158.

The Soviet Union provided a range of benefits and protective measures to working women, theoretically at least, to shield them from the most physically harmful aspects of the workplace and to enable them to fulfil their roles as mothers. One of the on-going problems for Soviet policy-makers can be linked to the Western feminist debate over whether women should be treated the same as or differently from men. Equality clearly meant different things to different Soviet women. One interviewee explained her understanding of equality: 'Men and women are different. To me equality means equal rights for the sexes. Same salaries, and sharing the household chores within the family. That's also equality'.[39]

After the revolution, it was quickly made illegal to dismiss a pregnant woman from her job and new mothers were granted relatively generous allowances for paid and unpaid maternity leave. These types of welfare benefits were widely appreciated.[40] They were also criticised for not going far enough. In the absence of any realistic redistribution of housework, indeed, one interviewee complained that 'it seems to me that our women suffer from equality', blaming the difficulties encountered in women's everyday lives on low salaries and men's consumption of alcohol. She continued 'Here equality consists of women carrying the heaviest burden'.[41] The real price of women's emancipation, according to one critic, had ultimately been paid in the loss of happiness, and that everyone would be happier 'if wives were calmer, more peaceful and relaxed'.[42]

---

[39] Lyalya, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 38.

[40] See Alexandra Costa, *Stepping Down from the Star: a Soviet Defector's Story*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1986, p. 27.

[41] Liza, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, pp. 24-5.

[42] Francine du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope*, London: Doubleday, 1989, p. 192.

A raft of official guidelines was seemingly in place to protect women in employment. In elite ambassadorial circles, for example, where couples and young families often travelled overseas together, Alexandra Costa points out 'that it was against the rules for a husband and wife to work together if one was subordinate to the other'.[43] It is not made clear in her account if this rule applied also to other areas of Soviet employment. Yet this seemingly protective guideline also worked against her because 'a certain seniority is observed for embassy wives' employment'.[44] Embassy wives, who were mostly very highly educated and did not want to sit at home for most of the day doing nothing, were not supposed to engage in full-time employment because this level of work was assigned directly by Moscow officials.

Workplace Friction:

The Soviet Union offered many opportunities for women to break into areas of activity and fields of employment traditionally dominated by men much earlier than was encountered in many Western countries, but, as came to be evidenced elsewhere, women did not always find themselves welcome in the male-dominated workplace. Barbara Moore-Pataleewa, writing at the beginning of the 1940s, noted the response she received to her incursions into the world of motorcycling in the early Soviet period: '…because I was the first woman to do it – I inevitably had to suffer the results of this interference into "man's sphere". It is different

[43] Costa, *Stepping Down*, p. 62.

[44] Costa, *Stepping Down*, p. 63. A similar restriction was in place for American spouses working at the US Embassy in Moscow: see Naomi F. Collins, *Through Dark Days and White Nights: Four Decades Observing a Changing Russia*, Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2008, p. 85.

now'.[45] She continued, 'The emancipation of ideas has progressed at such a pace since then, that it would be ridiculous even to mention the differentiation between the sexes in Soviet Russia', but she may have overestimated the rate of change.[46]

Even in the 1960s, renowned film-maker Marina Goldovskaya observed the gap between rhetoric and reality in her choice of profession: 'The equality of men and women, which had been proclaimed as a great achievement of socialism, never was accepted in everyday life'.[47] She encountered a great deal of prejudice in her chosen career as a camera operator, and she and the small number of her female co-workers were treated by many of their male colleagues with 'mistrust at best'.[48] Though her male co-workers were not overtly hostile towards her, neither were they supportive and they treated her with scepticism.[49]

Domestic Workers:

There was one particular area of regular pre-revolutionary employment that survived in the Soviet Union that is often regarded as an indicator of social, if not gender, inequality in the

[45] Barbara Moore-Pataleewa, *I am a Woman from Soviet Russia*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1943, p. 163.

[46] Moore-Pataleewa, *I am a Woman*, p. 163.

[47] Marina Goldovskaya, *Woman with a Movie Camera: My Life as a Russian Filmmaker*, trans. by Antonina W. Bouis, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006, p. 45. On p. 216, Goldovskaya notes that the advent of digital opened up the world of documentary film making to more women.

[48] Goldovskaya, *Woman with a Movie Camera*, p. 45.

[49] Goldovskaya, *Woman with a Movie Camera*, p. 85.

West. Whilst domestic service is generally considered to have been on the wane in many Western countries after the end of the First World War, it may come as a surprise to many to learn that in the Soviet Union there was a continued employment of domestic workers well after 1917, and this practice was by no means reserved for better-off and elite families.[50] In the early Soviet period, in particular, 'maids', daily help and nannies were to be found even in the most modest of households and sometimes in the very crowded conditions of the rooms and half rooms of Soviet communal apartments and student dormitories.[51] In shared student housing, one American-born woman complained that their live-in domestic help was more willing to assist the male students, believing that the women should clear up after themselves.[52] Another American-born observer, Margaret Wettlin, argues that she would have come to resent her husband if she had to perform the sorts of small household tasks for him that he should have been able to do himself, and she preferred instead to employ a maid.[53] In lamenting its passing, Marina Berkovich argued that hiring domestic help was 'a

[50] For an examination of the steps taken to unionise and regulate domestic work in the interwar years, see Alissa Klots, 'The Kitchen Maid as Revolutionary Symbol: Paid Domestic Labour and the Emancipation of Women, 1917-1941', in Melanie Ilic (ed.), *Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, London: Palgrave, 2018, pp. 83-100.

[51] See the examples given in Paola Messana, *Soviet Communal Living: an Oral History of the* Kommunalka, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011, pp. 12, 39.

[52] Leder, *My Life*, p. 46.

[53] Margaret Wettlin, *Fifty Russian Winters: an American Woman's Life in the Soviet Union*, New York: Pharos Books, 1992, p. 118.

custom from before the advent of post-revolutionary women's emancipation turned women into do-it-all alone creatures of Soviet stealth'.[54]

One explanation for the continued use of hired domestic help after 1917 is provided by Yelena Khanga. She notes that household workers in the Soviet Union (the number of which declined considerably after the Second World War once the granting of residents permits to live-in domestic workers was revoked) were often regarded as members of the family, rather than as part of the service sector as they were in the West where the private hiring of domestic help continued to be viewed by some in the context of the legacy of slavery.[55] One Lithuanian interview noted that the unmarried and bored cleaning lady came to her house 'not as a servant, but almost like a family member'.[56]

In some cases, live-in domestic workers were actual family members, attracted to the household in areas of the country where easy access to accommodation was in short supply, with the prospect of having a place to live in return for earning their keep through the provision of domestic chores and childcare.[57] Some Soviet domestic workers lived with the

---

[54] Marina Berkovich, *My Life through My Dresses: Growing Up Socialist*, Bloomington: Archway Publishing, 2018, p. 10.

[55] Yelena Khanga, with Susan Jacoby, *Soul to Soul: the Story of a Black Russian American Family, 1865-1992*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992, p. 247.

[56] Ausra Diliene, in Dalia Leinarte, *Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality: Life Stories of Lithuanian Women, 1945-1970,* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010, p. 170.

[57] Such practice was not restricted to the European Soviet republics. See Farideh Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan,* London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 119-20.

same household for decades and extended their care across generations of the same family, sometimes at the expense of creating their own.[58] Some nannies even took over the long-term and full-time care of children if the parents were no longer able to for whatever reason.

Paid domestic labour in the Soviet Union, as in other countries, was dominated by women, was poorly regulated and was not often well remunerated. Many live-in workers received little more than board and lodging in return for their daily long hours of service. In the years following the October revolution, domestic workers, often girls and young women from the countryside who were attempting to escape the confines of rural life and the fraught policies of collectivisation, sometimes lived in their new homes in uncomfortable circumstances, occasionally even without a bed , not to mention a room, to call their own. There are reports of live-in domestic workers sleeping in pull-down beds in the kitchen, in the corridor, in makeshift closet rooms and cubbyholes, on a trunk and behind a screen in an already-overcrowded single-room communal apartment and even in the bathtub.[59]

---

[58] See the examples in Lily Golden, *My Long Journey Home*, Chicago: Third World Press, 2002, pp. 17-18; Cathy Young, *Growing Up in Moscow: Memories of a Soviet Girlhood*, London: Robert Hale, 1989, p. 5.

[59] See the examples in Elena Bonner, *Mothers and Daughters*, trans. by Antonina W. Bouis, London: Hutchinson, 1992, p. 127; Galina Briskin-Paul, *Journey from Russia: a Life Story of a Woman's Courage*, Bloomington: Author House, 2004, p. 19; Svetlana Gouzenko, *Before Igor: My Memories of a Soviet Youth*, London: Cassell, 1961, pp. 169, 187; Leder, *My Life*, pp. 32, 148, 281; Matthews, *Russian Child and Russian Wife*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1949, p. 196; Nora Murray, *I Spied for Stalin*, London: Odhams Press, 1950, p. 32; Maya Plisetskaya, *I, Maya Plisetskaya*, trans. by Antonia W. Bouis, New Haven: Yale University

As well as employing domestic workers to assist with household management tasks, such as the laundry and cooking, women were also employed to help with childcare in circumstances where both parents were working, often long hours, and there were no other family members living nearby to offer assistance. Angelina Kaz'mina-B'yerkbakka appears to have spent much more time with her nanny when she was growing up in the 1930s, even once she started to attend school, than she did with her parents, who were working during the day and studying late into the evening.[60] A different nanny was hired when Angelina's brother was born twelve years later.[61]

Svetlana Gouzenko points to an exception in the trend for domestic work to be undertaken by women by noting that in Uzbekistan 'female domestics don't exist'.[62] The *malayka* employed in her childhood household was 'a male servant whom nobody considers a man'.[63] In a reversal of traditional gender roles, Gouzenko notes that these male workers were treated with such contempt that women did not even bother to cover their faces in front of him, and that their male servant had little chance of ever being able to afford a wife.

Press, 2001, p. 185; Street (ed.), *I Married*, p. 210; Galina Vishnevskaya, *Galina: a Russian Story*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984, p. 120-1.

[60] Angelina Kaz'mina-B'yerkbakka, *Russkoe schast'e: semeinaya khronika Stalinskikh vremen*, St Petersburg: Aleteiya, 2012, pp. 14, 21.

[61] Kaz'mina-B'yerkbakka, *Russkoe schast'e*, p. 40.

[62] Gouzenko, *Before Igor*, p. 37. Heyat, *Azeri Women*, p. 118, identifies the word *aghabaji* as the often derogatory term used for men in Azerbaijan who engaged in domestic labour.

[63] Gouzenko, *Before Igor*, p. 37.

As the Soviet economy expanded and household disposable income for some social strata increased in the later decades, there appears to have been a resurgence of the trend for better-off families to employ domestic workers and paid housekeepers. This was particularly evident, it was claimed, amongst 'high-ranking Soviet intelligentsia', and, in some instances, this was again justified by the suggestion that such workers were considered to be members of the family.[64]

Evident Inequalities:

There were many areas of Soviet everyday life in which women were easily able to discern the gender gap between rhetoric and reality, not least in the shortfalls and inadequate provision of public services to ease the burden of their daily routines and in the levels of financial remuneration they received for their efforts. Despite their growing success and progress at virtually all levels of education and training, Soviet women were not always able to turn their educational and professional qualifications into workplace and financial advantage. As is the case in many countries even today, a glass ceiling existed in Soviet women's achievements, through which it proved almost impossible for them to pass. This was acknowledged at even the highest levels as a fault in the Soviet system. Raisa Gorbacheva noted that 'it is in no way the laws of nature that are to blame for this but the same imperfections in our society'.[65]

Women in paid employment, on the whole, continued to earn less than men. In the workplace, despite the growing and eventually widespread use of female labour in jobs in

[64] For this claim, see du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women*, p. 65.

[65] Gorbacheva, *Ya nadeyus'*…, pp. 133-4; Gorbachev, *I Hope*, pp. 105-6.

which men had traditionally been employed, it was readily observed that 'there is still a substantial disparity in earnings – most women are confined to lower-paying jobs, their earning power far below that of men'.[66] A workforce stratified by gender was also identified as the source of women's lower earning capacity. It was readily acknowledged that the jobs that were mostly performed by women – in state childcare and as saleswomen, in this example – were generally remunerated with lower wages.[67]

A number of Soviet women perceived their failure to advance in the workplace or to be paid at the same level as men not to be the result of the fact that they were women *per se*, but because of the demands placed on them once they became mothers. Motherhood, however, was also widely regarded as something difficult for women to avoid in Soviet culture. One interviewee outlined the fact that her younger self had wanted to be free from the obligations of marriage and a family; she wanted to be able to live alone and enjoy her independence, but then 'my life changed'.[68] Another woman complained that 'the only true concept of equality is the ability to choose', and she was extremely critical that 'our patriarchal order is forcing us into marriage'.[69] On the whole, most Soviet women married and had their first child whilst still relatively young compared to women in the West, and this undoubtedly had an impact on their working lives and future life choices. In pointing to the difficulties that the Soviet Union

---

[66] Costa, *Stepping Down*, p. 109. For further examination of wage inequality in the interwar period, see Melanie Ilic, '"Equal Pay for Equal Work": Women's Wages in Soviet Russia', in Ilic (ed.), *Palgrave Handbook*, pp. 101-16.

[67] Lyalya, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 38.

[68] Sonya, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 65.

[69] du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women*, pp. 90-1.

experienced in overcoming its patriarchal past, Nina Khrushcheva notes that 'the social pressures of marriage and raising a family often offset any notions of egalitarianism'.[70]

One interviewee acknowledged that although she had not experienced direct discrimination as a woman, 'it's the fact that I'm a mother that gets in the way. … employers prefer men' because it was usually the mother who was expected to look after children if they fell sick.[71] It is no wonder, then, that one interviewee identified men's careers as being more important than women's.[72] Likewise, in another interview, men were identified as being more likely than women to prioritise their career over friends and family, whilst the priority running order for women was seen as men, children and finally their job.[73]

It should also be acknowledged that there were very evident inequalities between women. These existed not only in terms of different social strata and types of employment, as well as between urban and rural women, but also significantly between women of different ethnicities. Attitudes to women's emancipation, both on the part of the Soviet authorities promoting the equality agenda and on the part of women who were the policy recipients, differed across the Soviet empire. Whilst Soviet authorities in Moscow regarded women in the 'Soviet East' as being backward and in need of their enlightening intervention, women in the more Western-facing Baltic States sometimes regarded Soviet policies on women's emancipation introduced after the Second World War as an attack on their more developed

---

[70] Nina L. Khrushcheva, *The Lost Khrushchev: a Journey into the Gulag of the Russian Mind*, Mustang: Tate Publishing and Enterprises Ltd., 2014, p. 71.

[71] Lyuba, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 149.

[72] Masha, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 73.

[73] Natasha, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 165.

culture. Orientalist stereotyping from a white European perspective underpinned the Soviet authorities' ambitions to emancipate what they regarded as the enslaved women of the 'East', and to replace their dark past with a bright future. The Bolshevik vision of women's emancipation, involving eradicating illiteracy, encouraging girls into education and women into paid employment, and access to the new regime's secular cultural agenda, was not always well received in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Conversely, rather than regarding Soviet policies towards women as liberating and progressive, many women in the Baltic States felt that these had only a coarsening effect.

In the earlier decades of the Soviet Union the inequalities between women were sometimes explained away as the result of differences in rates of literacy and access to education and professional training, though these gaps began to close noticeably particularly in the post-war years. Other limits on women in the Soviet empire were identified because of their more restricted facility to speak the dominant Russian language. Gradually, the Soviet 'modernisation' agenda brought about greater social mobility amongst non-Russian women, with indicators showing that they were beginning to move to cities in order to raise their level of education; they were starting to marry at a later age and to have fewer children as part of smaller families.[74]

Attitudes towards Female Sexuality:

Inequality was evident, as it still is today, in the ways in which women's sexuality was expressed, viewed, monitored and regulated in Soviet society. In very general terms, women

[74] See Melissa Chakar's section on 'Buryat Women', in *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia: Transformation in Buryatia*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014, pp. 103-9.

were expected to behave modestly before marriage and to be faithful within it. Women were objectified, whilst men's infidelity was expected to be tolerated. Luba Brezhneva points out that 'the prevailing attitude toward women was amazingly cynical', and that the Kremlin elite and party officials regularly had affairs with 'ladies of the evening' and with women from the worlds of culture and the arts who fell under the control of the KGB.[75] One interviewee ruefully pointed out that 'equality doesn't only mean equal rights. It should consist of both rights and obligations. That also includes sex. If a man can have a lover, a woman should have the same right'.[76]

As is evident in many societies, in the Soviet Union women's perceived sexual misdemeanours and transgressions were subject to much more open scrutiny and critical comment than were men's, including condemnation by the Komsomol (youth section of the Communist Party). In some extreme cases, it has been suggested, women who were perceived to have transgressed the norms of acceptable moral behaviour were sometimes brutally punished in ways that were then hushed up.[77]

Concerns about the cross contamination of men by polluting female bodies is noted also in the following anecdotes, though these may also be linked to general concerns about lack of cleanliness and hygiene. Luba Brezhneva makes reference to the regular Soviet bathhouse

---

[75] Luba Brezhneva, *The World I Left Behind: Pieces of a Past*, trans. by Geoffrey Polk, New York: Random House, 1995, pp. 245-6.

[76] Nina, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 121.

[77] Brezhneva, *World I Left Behind*, pp. 178-9, 323. Brezhneva herself claims to have suffered a miscarriage following a brutal beating because of her relationship for a foreigner: see pp. 186-8.

ritual, where, in her family, men would use the sauna before women to prevent the birch twigs with which they beat themselves from becoming infected with a female smell.[78] Svetlana Gouzenko noted that her grandfather jumped from the Uzbek barber's chair where he was being shaved when he discovered that the exact same razor was being used, without the washing of hands or presumably the razor, to shave the body hair from the Uzbek women visiting the same shop.[79]

Sexual Exploitation:

A number of sources examined for this study imply that sex was occasionally treated as both a commodity of admission and of exchange in some areas of Soviet society. In addition, in some areas of the vast country public space on the street was not always a comfortable and safe place for women either. Sheila Fitzpatrick observed during her first visit to Tbilisi in Georgia that 'women couldn't walk down the street without being followed, whistled at, and simply pestered until they were forced to go home'.[80]

There are several examples that imply that, in these cases at least, sexual exchange was expected for women to gain entry to their chosen areas of study or even in routine areas of employment. Luba Brezhneva highlights this point in her account of her fleeting ideas about applying to acting school, given that her family did not have the established contacts in the field that would otherwise have granted her almost automatic admission. She immediately

[78] Brezhneva, *World I Left Behind*, p. 294.

[79] Gouzenko, *Before Igor*, p. 43.

[80] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives: a Memoir of Cold War Russia*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, p. 256.

dismissed her plans when she was told by a popular actor over a relaxed dinner in the convivial atmosphere of the Actors' Club that, even before reaching the point of appearing on screen or stage, '"girls like you have to sleep with old men like me"'.[81] In another example, Galina Briskin-Paul suggests that rumour had it that in order to secure a place under the supervision of a leading male professor at one particular research institute where she studied in the 1950s, 'a young lady was supposed to be nice looking and agreeable to intimate relations'.[82]

Brezhneva's account also suggests that rural local party officials routinely exploited young village women, but that this could also be materially advantageous for the women's family, and that in workplaces across other areas of the country, 'Soviet women without powerful relatives had little defense against office tyrants. Typists and secretaries were ill advised to reject the advances of their bosses; actresses and ballerinas who said no to the Politburo were asking for trouble'.[83]

Conclusion:

The rhetoric of equality and women's emancipation is easily discernible in a whole range of Soviet official literatures and reflections on these concepts can be found in the first-hand narratives used for this study. As someone who had travelled to a number of Western countries and, thus, had the opportunity to reflect critically on her self-identity, Barbara Moore-Pataleewa outlined the position in the Soviet Union as she saw it in the interwar years:

[81] Brezhneva, *World I Left Behind*, p. 133.

[82] Briskin-Paul, *Journey from Russia*, p. 71.

[83] Brezhneva, *World I Left Behind*, pp. 300, 333.

> …a woman is equal to a man intellectually, socially and economically and often even in physical strength and endurance. This brings their relationship on an equal footing and does not put a woman in the category of 'weaker sex' in every sense. When in Russia – I felt I was a fully-fledged human being, while in the West I am only a woman…[84]

In reality, it was not only the shortfalls in the practical applications of the equality and emancipation agendas that came under scrutiny and criticism in the Soviet Union. The Soviet model of sexual equality also gave rise to a significant debate about the nature of sex role socialisation and the consequent de-sexing of women, which was deemed by some to render them less feminine.[85] In some people's minds, the drive to sexual equality in the Soviet Union resulted in stripping women of their specific gender attributes and distinctiveness. For one critical observer, interviewed in the late Soviet period, women's emancipation had had a very negative impact on gender distinctions. Emancipation required that women should go out to work, leaving them little time for themselves 'to work on their femininity'.[86] A belief in immutable differences between men and women, biologically determined rather than culturally constructed, also framed the way in which some women viewed their position in Soviet society. Even one of the Soviet Union's world-ranking female chess champions, Nona Gaprindashvili, argued that a woman's attention span is shorter than a man's, and that her

---

[84] Moore-Pataleewa, *I am a Woman*, pp. 289-90.

[85] For more detail, see Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990.

[86] Anna, in Hansson and Liden (eds), *Moscow Women*, p. 52.

attention is more likely to be diverted to domestic issues, nurturing and others who need her: 'no centuries of emancipation will ever cure that imbalance'.[87]

Diarist Elena Romine was well-aware of some of the debates that informed feminism in contemporary Western literature, where women were still fighting for the right to engage in paid work. She notes that despite the fact that most of her female friends were in paid employment, none of them 'complains about inequality'. In contrast, what they wanted was to have some of their 'rights' taken away and not be under the obligation to perform roles that stripped them of simply being a woman. Here, Soviet feminism is understood as 'the right to be a woman, not a man'. Romine suggests that those women who were actively seeking to marry foreign men were looking to escape into the world of 'inequality': 'we're tired of being everything – wife, mother, housewife, financial support, boss, and subordinate. We want to be weak and helpless. We want to give ourselves up into slavery. But no one will take us. *Our* slaveholders are too weak'.[88]

The critiques of the Soviet emancipation and equality campaigns identified from the women's narratives used in this study provide a surprising degree of reciprocity and overlap with contemporary debates in Western feminism: how could women come to understand what they should be like if the only role models presented to them are mostly men? Should women gratefully receive the crumbs from the table grudgingly offered to and left for them by men, or does women's emancipation require their more active participation? Should women be treated as if they are the same as men, or should there be recognition of their essential

[87] du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women*, p. 193.

[88] Romine, *Intimate Diary*, pp. 81-2.

differences? Does legislation provide sufficient underpinning to guarantee the realisation of sexual equality?

By the later Soviet period, the debates on sexual equality were complicated further by the fact that women were again being urged to remember their essential feminine qualities. At no stage of the process of women's emancipation should their new found freedoms be seen to overshadow their central roles as wives and mothers. In the face of such contradictory messages, Cathy Young notes amusingly that 'the only thing that has saved millions of Soviet women from going crazy trying to sort it all out is the long-developed salutary habit of paying no attention to any official messages whatsoever'.[89] As she herself noted, her analysis of the Soviet debates on equality boiled down to the following: 'you can have education, you can have jobs, you can sit on the Supreme Soviet, as long as you remember to stay in your place – a pace or two behind the men'.[90]

From the opinions and observations about women's experiences of Soviet everyday life drawn from the readings included in this study, it would be difficult to disagree with Lyuba Vinogradova's statement that 'in the Soviet state equality was only ever theoretical'.[91] One Lithuanian interviewee claimed that in the post-war Soviet Union, 'work was for women, power for men'.[92] Nina Khrushcheva offers a critique of Soviet society where 'the extremes of patriarchy and progress' were scrappily slapped together, but in which women could never

[89] Young, *Growing Up*, p. 147.

[90] Young, *Growing Up*, p. 147.

[91] Lyuba Vinogradova, *Defending the Motherland: the Soviet Women who Fought Hitler's Aces*, tans. by Arch Tait, London: Maclehose Press, 2015, p. 90.

[92] Leokadija Dirzinskaite, in Leinarte, *Adopting and Remembering*, p. 96.

win.[93] What we can conclude from the observations examined here is that on the surface a great deal changed in the opportunities that opened up for women after 1917, but underneath the Soviet rhetoric of emancipation and equality much stayed the same for women in their personal, familial and professional relationships with men and in their everyday lives.

[93] Khrushcheva, *Lost Khrushchev*, p. 109.