

Overview of the Feminist Movement in Contemporary Russia¹

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Feminist groups in Russia are rather recent initiatives. Most of them were organized in the very end of the cycle of mass protest mobilization in the end of 1989 – beginning of 1990s. 1990 is a starting point for Russian feminism. Moscow is an unquestionable center of Russian feminism. There are also feminist groups in St. Petersburg, Tver, Naberezhnye Chelny, Myrny, Petroskoi and other cities of Russia – industrial and educational centres. Some of these groups constitute the network of consortium, which is coordinated by the American feminist foundations. Several groups are supported by Frauenanstiftung of Germany. In 1990 first Forum of Women initiatives was held in Dubna; in 1992 – second Forum took place. Women initiatives publish their newsletters and magazines, circulating on the Federal level of the network.

The feminist movement in modern Russia has already 10 years life-history. One cannot call this movement highly influential politically, though it is vocal in public discourse. Its main achievement is gradual conscious-raising of Russian women and voicing the issues that had been never discussed before (domestic violence, sexual harassment, discrimination against women, sexual minorities, etc.) and establishing the very notion of women's agenda in politics.

The contemporary feminist movement in Russia started as a dissident group initiative when samizdat journals 'Woman In Russia' and 'Maria' started to circulate in Leningrad in 1979 (edited by T.Mamonova, T. Goricheva, V. Malokhovskaya, Ju. Voznesenskaya). The topics of their writings were discrimination of women in Soviet politics and everyday life, problems of reproductive health in Soviet society, abuse of women in prisons, rape, domestic violence and alike. The writers were forced to emigrate in 1980. For another almost ten years grass-roots women's movement did not appear. Only officialdom provoked the discussion on the women's' positions in society in the general frame of the 'solved women's question' and 'certain tensions of women's sex roles combinations'.

Structural changes brought about by transformation (political, cultural and economic) provide opportunities for women's movement in today's Russia. These opportunities are especially vocal in comparative perspective, if we compare the situation with the Soviet period. Soviet authoritarian state was not conducive to any grassroots activities if they proclaimed any political purposes. The Women's question was solved, – according to official statement and women's agenda could be discussed only in the frame of reinforcement of women's responsibilities in the family. The only women's organization – Committee of Soviet Women worked as 'a transmission belt' of the party – state politics.

In the mid 1980s in the course of Gorbachev's politics *women's councils* on the enterprises were re-established, though 'Gorbachev's women's agenda' was quasi-traditional.

Its purposed was to weaken double burden of Russian women by returning them into the private domain.

In the last years of perestroika on the peak of mass protest mobilization first women's groups were formed. In Leningrad Olga Lipovskaya, an activist in the democratic movement, started to publish almanac 'Women's Reading' in 1988. Later, in 1993 O. Lipovskaya became the head of the St. Petersburg Centre for Gender Problems. In Moscow in 1989 women academics Anastasija Posadsakaya, Natalija Zakharova, Valentina Konstantinova and Olga Voronina formed the League for Emancipation from Sexual Stereotypes (LOTOS) – they came to the decision to form a women's initiative in the course of their participation in the mass discussions of the democratic organizations. Later the leaders of the group established Moscow Center for Gender Studies as a research unit in the Russian Academy of Sciences and a voluntary association.

In the beginning of the 1990s professional organizations and women clubs, such as Transfiguration (Nina Gabrielyan), Association of Women Journalists (Nadezhda Azhghina, Irina Jurna), Women's Club 'Harmonia' (Maria Arbatova), Association of women in Academy (Svetlana Aivazova) were established. Their leaders – the first cohort of New Russian feminists – were professional women of distinguished entrepreneurial zest, that were oriented on the development and justification of women's agenda in the period of transformation. These women's groups focused on the discrimination against women in different life spheres, voiced it developed policies of struggle for equal opportunities for women. 'Equality in Difference' – this is the main frame of different women's initiatives. Such ideology has been obviously the reaction to the Soviet androgenic policy.

Mass actions that were seen as resources to raise women's consciousness and to develop nationwide women's movement were organized by the small initiative groups. Two Independent Women's Forums (1991, 1992) organized by Moscow Gender Studies Center were important events that mobilized women's organizations all over the country. Their agenda was grasped in the slogans – 'Democracy without women is not Democracy' and 'From Problems to Strategies'.

Now Russia's Women's movement is a diverse NGO sector. It comprises diversity of initiatives directed on the reconsideration of women's position in society. Women's groups conventionally can be divided into the following categories, depending on the main purposes of their activity: (1) political oriented groups that work as electoral blocs (Women of Russia), and (2) non-governmental women's organizations per se, belonging to the third sector of social institutions (between state and market). Women's NGO sector includes professional associations of women, self-help groups – grassroots organizations that are based on the shared experience of participants and mutual support (Mothers of Invalids, Breast-cancer Survivals, Women of Higher Education, etc.), feminist groups of various orientation (Center for Gender Studies in Moscow, Center for Gender Problems in St. Petersburg, etc.), practical projects for women (trust telephone lines, organizations for women who had the experience of rape, Crisis centers, Shelters for women, etc.), discussion clubs, educational and research centers for gender studies. Non-governmental organizations orient themselves on the direct help for women, children and families, lobbying of laws, oriented on social guarantees and social policy issues. Many NGOs are the units of family survival in the course of reforms.

Women's NOGO sector in Russian society is not stable in numbers and membership. Many groups hardly survived 5 years, others appear to be quite stable. Women's

groups share the problems of organizational instability with all the third sector of Russian society.

The sector of contemporary Russian feminist movement is a branch of women's organizations. It is centered around metropolitan cities – Moscow and St. Petersburg. Several University centers also have feminist groups – the map of women's associations covers more 20 Russian towns.

State of Art in the Russian Women's Movement Today

While my research concentrates on the first leaders of the New Russian Feminist Initiatives, it is important to see what is the situation in the movement today. I will formulate my thesis very rigidly. I believe that lack of new leaders is the true problem of Russian feminism today. Those women that established feminist groups in the early 1990s are now institutional leaders. New generation of leadership is not formed, though feminist views are expressed on the individual level. Individuals that identify themselves as feminists are not engaged in feminist politics. They develop individual coping strategies or at least the strategies that does not presume movement mobilisation. They do not see feminist mobilization as fruitful way to solve individual and collective problems.

Russian transformation is experienced by Russian women as change in their everyday life and thus, in their family situation. For many of them reforms mean change of work situation, lack of financial and social stability, breakdown of social welfare (childcare and medical care, new educational demands for children), experiences of ageism and sexism on the labour market. As in many cases state institutions fails to provide sufficient welfare, families work as welfare and survival economic units. In one of her last TV interviews famous Russian politician Galina Starovoitova emphasized that in current situation Russian citizens have to turn their attentions to their families and to consider family resources for the everyday life problem solutions (Fall, 1998).

In the transformation period as well as in any instability period, a family functions as a strategic unit (though not always efficient). The reinforcement of a family as a unit of coping or survival strategy, influences women's position in society, especially reinforcing their family roles in the unstable situation. The family roles of Russian women as they were learnt in Soviet times were not just domestic chores. They presumed contributions to the family budget from women as breadwinners. Currently women compete with men on the labour market. In spite of the fact that in the beginning of the 1990s unemployment 'had a female face', gradually the situation has been changing. Recent statistics shows that percentage of male and female unemployed is very close. Women take their part in the coping or survival strategies of the family, and this involvement in private sphere is a barrier for their public participation in politics, in social movements.

When involved in public activities, esp. in social movements, women often replicate there the activities of the family coping strategies: they organize self-help groups, voluntary associations, small enterprises, etc. I believe that transformation is a structural condition that causes dis-empowerment of women in public life, and lack of women' movement mobilization (at least temporally).

One has also to take into account that cultural context is not conducive for Russian feminist movement – gender traditionalism and sexism are deeply rooted attitudes; crisis

of masculinity and femininity is the diagnosis given to the gender condition in Russian discourse. The reputation of Western feminism in Russian public is quite dubious: its claims and policies seeming quite irrelevant for Russian situation.

Major problems of the Russian Women's NGOs are financial sustainability, stability in organization and activities. Economic instability is seen as the main purpose of the instability of the women's organizations. Financial resources are mainly coming from the Western foundations and NGOs that promote not cooperation by rivalry and competition between groups. Another problem of the movement, according to the expert's estimation (Sperling) is translation of feminist knowledge into the Russian context. The third problem is political efficiency of women's movement. Russian Government adopted National Program for the Improvement of Women's Status in RF in 1996. Though Women's NGOs and National Program formulate their policies on the basis of Beijing and Nairobi UN conventions, national machinery of attaining these goals is not developed. The relations between the state institutions and women's groups remain far from being efficient. Actually there is the gap between political institutions and women's NGOs. V. Sperling argues that communication problem is one of the main for the women's movement. In the country where telecommunications are costly and unreliable – direct face-to face communication is the most important space for the contacts.

The consolidation of women's movement today is hardly achievable. It is difficult to argue that there is actual need in this consolidation. However networking among women's groups on the national level has certain results. Such networks as Independent Women's Forum, League of Women, Consortium of Women's NGOs (WINROCK). are helpful in the strategy of cooperation of resources of women's organizations. They provide space for feminist oriented debates. There are also tendencies to consolidate the resources of the women's groups of similar profile. The Network of Crisis Centres was established in Russia as well as the Network of Soldiers Mothers' Organizations.

Mass media is important resource for women's movement. Radio Nadezhda, Women's section in the weekly journal 'Ogonek', TV show – 'I – she myself' – inform the public on women's agenda and discuss relevant issues. The women only editions – 'Moskvichka', 'Preobrazhenie', provide necessary information and relevant statistics accompanied by commentary.

Political women's groups are not very successful. First attempts to build up such groups appeared in 1990 – after the failure of the Communist electoral quotas – Kiriltchenko organized women's United Party of Women, Women's Party of Sovereign Russia was founded in Tomsk. Political, electoral bloc 'Women of Russia' attracted attention of researchers after its success on the Duma elections of 1993. Activities of this Duma faction is assessed differently by women's groups' members, probably because of the political composition of the faction, the core of which was constituted by the former members of the Committee of Soviet Women. They were not expected to have feminist orientation and were not rooted in feminist movement. However this organization adopted the slogans of the first feminist Forum and formulated its policy of the achievement of equal representation of women and men in the institutes of power.

In several political parties (Yabloko, Party of Economic Freedom) there are sections oriented on the women's agenda. Now the contacts of Women of Russia with other organization are growing. 'Union of women of Russia' – the core organization of this political bloc – is cooperating with the feminist groups. This means that starting from different

standpoints feminist groups and Women of Russia become more and more converged in their agenda and policies.

The most important resource of the first women's organizations were *token women* that started them. Women's initiatives started in the context of broken tradition of independent collective action and independent women's leadership. The first groups started their activities in the atmosphere of anti-feminist discourse and general agreement on the crisis of Soviet ideology and practice of gender roles. Until now the movement is not mass or strong, it mainly takes the form of NGOs that are still weak in Russian society. However one can claim that though small and weak contemporary Russian feminist groups manage to formulate the women's agenda in contemporary discourse: the fight against sexism in the society under transformation.

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Note

1. In this review the result of my own own research are presented as well as the results given in the publications of Sperling, V.; Racioppi, L., K. O'Sullivan See.; R. Marsh, Posadskaya, A.; Waters, E. and Posadskaya, A.; Rimashevskaya, N.; Noonan, N., Lipovskaya, O., Konstantinova, V., Arbatova M.