

Soviet Women:

THE 'PROBLEMY' THAT WON'T GO AWAY

Twenty-five years after Stalin's death, a clearer picture of everyday life in the Soviet Union is beginning to emerge in the West. To help its own social scientists, Moscow is publishing more analyses and more statistics on everything from housing and employment to birthrates and divorce. Nowhere are the stresses in Soviet society more evident than among its women, who bear the brunt of both economic austerity and contradictory official policy. Here, former Wilson Center scholar Bernice Madison, a frequent visitor to Russia, examines their situation, with a sidelong glance at their American counterparts.

by Bernice Madison

Readers' letters to the editors of Soviet women's magazines depict a society where household appliances break down, husbands drink heavily, and the process of divorce is often costly and time-consuming; where wage scales are low, where child care conflicts with the need to work, and husbands refuse to help with the household chores.

One cartoon shows a frenzied wife, exhausted from eight hours on the job, hurrying to prepare her family's supper. The husband, in house slippers, lounges in front of the television. "What's taking so long?" he demands. But humor provides only sporadic relief from the unremitting drudgery, movingly portrayed in much recent Russian fiction and starkly recorded in cold statistics. Even the Soviet leadership is worried. "We men," President Leonid Brezhnev told a recent trade union congress, "have done far from all we could to ease the dual burden that [women] bear both at home and in production."

In some ways, the positions of women in the Soviet Union and the United States appear to have much in common. In both

countries, women outnumber men, and women's average life expectancy is higher. In both countries, the marriage rate has declined, while the number of unmarried couples living together has risen. The rate of illegitimacy is almost the same. The number of all marriages ending in divorce—one out of three—is identical. And in both nations, women earn far less than men, though the gap is narrower in the Soviet Union.

Yet these shared characteristics mask extraordinary contrasts. For example, 40 percent of women in Russia live in rural areas, compared to 3.5 percent in the United States. The percentage of working American women holding "white-collar" jobs (63.5 percent) is almost double that of Soviet women (32.1 percent). There are fewer female "heads of families" in the United States, and far fewer abortions are performed (1.1 million annually compared with 7–10 million annually in the U.S.S.R.). Nevertheless, thanks to the Pill and other convenient birth-control devices,* the U.S. birthrate (15.3 per 1,000 population) is lower than the Soviet Union's (18.2).

At the time of the 1917 Revolution, the Bolsheviks promised that through socialism, sexual exploitation would give way to sexual equality: A "new Soviet man" would supplant the oppressive fathers and husbands of czarist Russia. And indeed, in a striking improvement on the pre-1917 situation, Soviet women now share the legal rights of Soviet men within and outside the family. There is no ostensible need for an Equal Rights Amendment in Russia.

In practical terms, however, genuine equality has yet to be achieved. Russian women today are encouraged by the state to cultivate an identity as "good workers, good wives, and good mothers." Playing this triple role is never easy, even in America; but in the Soviet Union, for all its superpower status, poverty is still widespread. Three decades after the end of World War II, housing, consumer goods, and services are still scarce. Women bear the brunt of it all.

No longer able to blame this state of affairs on "capitalist remnants" in the Russian consciousness, the Kremlin has given planners increased latitude in rethinking the numerous *problems* besetting Soviet women, and, by extension, the Soviet state itself. Data on time-use and public opinion are increasingly available, and research by Soviet social scientists is improving in quality. However, Western students of Soviet society must still cope with sizable information gaps.

*Most are available in the U.S.S.R. Some, such as condoms, are of poor quality; others, like the Pill, are discouraged for medical reasons. In general, Soviet officials are not enthusiastic about birth control, given the nation's falling birthrate and increasing labor shortages.

The most recent information on women as "good workers" reveals that almost 68 percent of the nearly 100 million Soviet women over age 16 are employed, accounting for 54.5 percent of all workers. (Roughly 48 percent of all such U.S. women are employed, accounting for 41 percent of the labor force.) For most Soviet women, working is quite simply an economic necessity: Either the husbands don't make enough money,* or the women don't have husbands.

About 70 percent of Soviet doctors are women, as are some 30 to 40 percent of the engineers, college teachers, and scientific personnel. Such jobs, however, employ only one-third of working Russian women; the other two-thirds serve in less exalted occupations: as factory workers, cleaning women, farm hands. Almost 20 million Soviet women (compared to 367,000 in the United States) work in agriculture. In low-status occupations, as in high-status ones, men enjoy privileged access to the supervisory jobs. Of collective farm chairmen and other senior farm managers, for example, only 2 percent are women.

The rate of pay for men and women in the same jobs is the same. But women predominate in sectors where earnings and wage rates are lower. On average, their wages amount to 60 to 75 percent of men's. Since sickness benefits and pensions (women's retirement age: 55) are computed on the basis of wages, inequality follows women into the sickroom—or into retirement. Many pensions would be inadequate anyway; the official "subsistence income" (or poverty level) has not been redefined since 1965; the current average pension falls below it.

Most Russian women are eager to marry and attach greater importance to the family than to work outside the home. But their efforts to be "good wives" can make it difficult for them to improve their skills as "good workers." The Russian male's disdain for household tasks is deep-rooted, and the time a working wife must devote to shopping, cleaning, and cooking amounts to a "second shift" and makes for an exhausting 13- to 15-hour day.

*The Soviet wage system was not designed for the one-breadwinner family. The average income of a Russian industrial worker is 150 rubles a month—well below the official (and outdated) poverty line of 200 rubles (or \$220) a month for a family of four.

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ЭКСТРЕННЫЙ
ДАМСКИЙ
ВЫПУСК

*"Lucky one!" sighs harried
shopper as she eyes
display featuring "Special Order
of Women's Wear."
From the Soviet
journal Literatournaya
Gazetta (1977).*



The burden of the second shift is increased by a shortage of modern appliances (such as washer-dryers or dishwashers), long lines in food stores, and poor-quality consumer goods.

The causes of greatest suffering among women, however, are alcoholic husbands, an "elemental" problem that has been accompanied by a boost of 450 percent in liquor sales since 1940. (Per-capita Soviet vodka consumption may now be as high as nine pints monthly, more if one includes the produce of illegal stills.) One result: 70 percent of all Soviet divorces are initiated by women, with male alcoholism cited as the prime cause in up to 40 percent of the cases.

All this has an obvious influence on Soviet women's ability to perform as "good mothers." Yet, faced with the postwar decline in birthrate and with a troublesome labor shortage, the Soviet government is encouraging women to bear the "ideal" three children. Women are entitled to full pay for 112 days of pregnancy-maternity leave. They can take a year of unpaid leave to care for a child, without prejudice to job ratings. The most significant government service is day care, for which parents pay according to their income. There are now 12.7 million children in preschools—41 percent of all preschool-age Russian

UVAZHAEMYE REDAKTORY!

Few American women would willingly change places with their Soviet counterparts. But that is not to say that women in the U.S.S.R. meekly accept their lot. As their feisty letters to the Russian women's magazine Kresti'ianka (Peasant Woman) suggest, Soviet women are quick to denounce everything from job discrimination to estranged husbands, from shoddy consumer goods to the endemic alcoholism that has destroyed so many Russian families. Some examples:

Dear Editors! (Uvazhaemye Redaktory)

Do you remember the article in which you told about citizen M. who, for several years, has been hiding to avoid carrying out a court child-support order? As a result, his former wife, instead of support for her two daughters, receives only copies of official correspondence exchanged between several different legal jurisdictions.

We, the women of the city of T., wish to secretly inform you, dear editors, that M. is living on Lane L., number 9. We would be most satisfied if we could read that this time justice triumphed.

Women living on Lane L.

I recently bought some "quality" snaps to secure my clothing. They are not bad to look at, but they have a curious trait: While they are easy to open, closing them is impossible. I tried my hands, teeth, even a hammer—nothing doing. Then I had a happy thought: pliers!

Since then I go nowhere without pliers. I ordered a special chain and wear them instead of a pendant. I feel that soon this will become *le dernier cri* in fashion.

M. Kosogva

Last year you told about a special "bonus" at the agricultural station in B. province. There, the store manager gave away three new glasses with each purchase of a bag of flour.

"Half measures!" said Z., the chairman of our agricultural cooperative; he ordered that buyers of a bag of flour should receive two 100-gram bottles of cognac as well.

"With this system," says Z., "the peasant is less dependent on his wife in terms of the economic plan. Whether she wants to or not, she brings him a drink to cure the effects of his earlier drink."

Our drunkards are now in seventh heaven. When they see chairman Z., they dash forward to pump his hand—after having pumped plenty into themselves.

Tell us, dear editors, how you regard the initiative shown by Chairman Z. Perhaps this is a progressive method of serving the population and we simply do not appreciate it.

A. Gorokhov

children—compared with 6–7 percent (1.2 million) of their American counterparts.

So far, these programs have failed to induce women to bear the “ideal” three children. Why? Heavy workloads, cramped living conditions (average residential floor space per person in urban areas is about 8 square meters), and widespread poverty tell part of the story. The difficulty women have in obtaining child-support payments (most of them court-ordered) from ex-husbands is certainly a factor, as is the Soviet legal code, which, in divorce cases, does not allow the wife’s portion of the couple’s total property to be increased to compensate for her custody of the children.

With the “disincentives” to bearing children outweighing the incentives, it is understandable that many women publicly support the three-child goal while in fact they stop after only one or two children.*

How does this compare with the situation in the United States? Among Soviet women, employment has almost reached a saturation point; but the number of women in the U.S. civilian labor force is still growing rapidly, with women accounting for three-fifths of the total labor force increase in the last decade. Economic need is the main reason for married women working in both countries. But in the United States, this often means a desire to reach or maintain a certain standard of living, not sheer necessity. In both countries, women are underrepresented as managers and overrepresented in low-status, “female” occupations. But the opportunities are growing faster for American women.

Eligibility for U.S. social security benefits is acquired after 10 years of work—half as long as in the Soviet Union—and dependent wives may receive 50 percent of their husband’s pension, compared to 10 percent in the U.S.S.R. Impoverished women pensioners or women on welfare may, in the United States, be eligible for income supplements (cash or food stamps) which lift many out of poverty. In the U.S.S.R. there are neither supplements nor food stamps; welfare is available only to aged or totally disabled persons who are destitute and have no relatives able to assist. Such people receive 10 rubles (\$11) per month.

For married women, the most striking differences are qualitative. Although not all U.S. husbands help their work-

*An exception are the Muslim women in central Asia. In 1970, average family size in the Tadzhik S.S.R. was 5.4 persons versus 3.1 in Estonia. This “Muslimization” of Russia is viewed with a jaundiced eye by Soviet demographers; more than 50 percent of the population of the U.S.S.R. is now non-Russian.

WOMEN AS WORKERS AND WIVES, 1977		
	USSR	USA
Population	257 million	216 million
	Women 53.5%	51.7%
	Men 46.5%	48.3%
Women in Labor Force	67.5 million*	40 million
Percent working part-time	negligible	28.6
Percent of women over 16	67.5	48.4
Percent of all workers	54.5	41.0
Families		
Average size	3.7	3.4
Children born out of wedlock	1 in 10	1 in 7
Female-headed families as percent of all families	17	13.6

*1974

ing spouses with household tasks, it is a safe bet that more Americans do so than Russians. In all but the poorest families, American women are also aided by a variety of laborsaving appliances, and food-shopping is a chore but not an ordeal. As for alcoholic husbands (and wives), the United States has its share, but alcoholism has not reached the epidemic proportions evident in the Soviet Union.

What about American women as mothers? The U.S.S.R.'s system of pregnancy, maternity, and sickness benefits (which includes a week's paid leave to care for a sick child) is comprehensive and generous. No counterpart exists in the United States. Two recent Supreme Court decisions,* although they did not produce a nationwide system of paid maternity leave, have entitled more pregnant women to (a) remain on the job as long as their physicians advise; (b) receive normal disability benefits during their pregnancy leave; and (c) be reinstated later in their old jobs. This case-by-case approach as yet does not compare with the established, all-inclusive Russian system.

In sum, although women in the United States were long regarded as creatures who could find real fulfillment *only* as mothers and wives, Americans have moved well away from this

**Geduldig v. Aiello*, 1974, and *General Electric v. Gilbert*, 1976. See also New York Court of Appeals, *Brooklyn Union Gas Co. v. Appeal Board*, 1976.

constricted view. And because it is far easier in the United States for citizens to raise difficult issues, social change can occur here far more rapidly than in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet government, however, still tends to view women as "productive units" expected to operate effectively in *both* the work place and the home. There is thus a conflict between official inducements to work and official inducements to bear children. In the future, will Moscow stress the "pro-natalist" view that considers women most useful to the state when bearing and rearing children? The result would be a loss of women workers—to say nothing of condemning working women to low-status drudgery. Or will the government opt for sexual equality with full participation and opportunity for women in the occupational sphere? This would inevitably lower the already low birthrate—a disastrous prospect in light of the Soviet Union's accelerating labor shortage.

Beyond this, there are some human questions. How can the Kremlin foster a fundamental change in the attitudes of Soviet males? How can it ensure that women get not only equal pay for equal work but also work commensurate with their education and training? And how can it lighten the often oppressive burdens for those millions of women it has encouraged to work and raise children at the same time? Even Soviet planners realize that more refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines alone will not prevent millions of abortions, increasing alcoholism, and a further dip in the birthrate.

In short, the Soviet leadership must come to terms with why the "new Soviet man"—and woman—have not materialized. How can the leadership balance what the Party wants with what women want? How can it fulfill even the minimal requirements of freedom and dignity? The internal contradictions are apparent. Even with growing Soviet research on the role of women in work and family, Moscow finds these questions difficult to pose, let alone answer.

EDITOR'S NOTE. *For added background, interested readers may wish to look up The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia, by Richard Stites (Stanford, 1978), and Women in Russia, edited by Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Lapidus (Stanford, 1977).*