

Yakutia's Men Today: Widowing Wives and Longing for Life?¹

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the rather positive demographic statistics of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), many men, especially in the rural parts of the Republic, are challenged by severe health problems, unemployment, and changes in their status within the family. The author analyzes these processes on the basis of official statistics, survey materials, and interviews that she conducted in rural communities in several districts. She connects this analysis with a description of changing patterns of marriage and divorce, familial life and childcare. Life expectancy of men went down in the 1990s and has persistently been much lower than that of women, hence the title of the article. Traditionally attaining their authority from their being fathers, hunters, and breadwinners, Sakha and other indigenous men now appear to be less secure about their social identity, which leads to a certain degree of passivity and even apathy. The author acknowledges that men in rural areas have started to organize themselves, trying to solve these problems by reviving ethnic traditions of the peoples of the North.

Keywords: Family, Health, Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples of the North, Marriage, Mortality, Sakha

In recent years, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)² has been demonstrating quite positive demographics. However, this is a precarious, superficial impression of the current problems, including gender issues. In Yakutia, difficulties with realization of men's social identity are visible, primarily in connection with unemployment, physical health, life expectancy, and limited chances for establishing familial and marital relationships.

The unemployment index among men in Yakutia is higher than in Russia on average (10.2 vs. 7.1). Officially, in the Republic as a whole, men constitute around half of the unemployed, numerically predominating in elderly age groups. However, in practice, young men's unemployment level is very high in ethnic villages.³ In the Republic, 36 percent of men

are unemployed, including individuals with a higher education; in this category, every third man has attained specialized secondary education.

Whereas in the beginning of the 1980s, ten marriages and four divorces were registered for every thousand inhabitants, in 2007 the same number of divorces vs. seven marriages was registered. There is no lack of marriageable girls: the 20-to-30 age group consists of approximately the same number of young men and girls. Nevertheless, every third man younger than 30 and every fourth man younger than 35 has never been married. The explanations for the unexpected celibacy of men, be they Orthodox believers or pagans, can be found in the social sphere.

In Yakutia, men continue occupying leading positions in economics, finances, and politics, in regional and local official bodies. But they pay a high price for their apparent leadership: in Yakutia, the mortality rate among men is almost twice as high as it is among women. There are many men suffering from tuberculosis and oncological diseases. Among drug addicts and alcoholics, the percentage of men is above 80 percent. As a result, there are too many widows in the Republic. One of the interesting phenomena is self-organization of Yakutia's men trying to solve these problems by reviving ethnic traditions of the peoples of the North.

In Russia, the problems connected with the birth and upbringing of new generations, which are closely interrelated with gender issues, have become especially topical in the light of demographic and socioeconomic realities. The fact that the state has addressed such a social institution as the family⁴ itself seems symbolic to us. On the one hand, the state has started again to recognize its primary human capital—people with their current lives and families. On the other hand, such interest reflects topical issues that have accumulated in the sphere of familial relations. The necessity for a decreased mortality rate and increased life expectancy among Russians are obvious for every sensible citizen. In sparsely populated northern regions of Russia, including the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), socio-demographic tensions are fraught with economic and geopolitical perils; in particular, the consequences of legal and illegal migration from China to Russia are discussed in academic publications and the mass media quite often.

Based on the fact that nationwide and regional processes are “programmed” within the communities, it should be admitted that the state is interested in successful socialization of men and women as family members and as creators and keepers of new families. The composition of

every family, its material and spiritual well-being, cultural development, and characteristic values are important to formation of the society.

In particular, in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), such issues as support for families and childcare, revival of family traditions, and good practices of motherhood and fatherhood have been attended rather well even in the most difficult times. In seemingly distant 1994-1996, the Years of the Family were announced in the Republic; 1999 and 2000 saw the declaration of the Years of Children and Children's Sports; and 2003 was the Year of the Healthy Family (Sukneva et al. 2006). In order to support families at the municipal level, the problems of birth rate and children's upbringing, employment, and education, and crime prevention and healthcare were discussed.

However, it should be noted that reproduction, childcare and other aspects of family life were considered part of the "female sphere." During the whole 20th century, the state propagated families with more children, with a reference to the ethnic traditions of the Yakuts, Russians, and indigenous numerically small peoples of the North in Yakutia. Women's reproductive ability has always been considered a priority by authorities: it is in the focus of state support (the Republic's aid is paid to more than 110,000 mothers, including both mothers of large families and single mothers). Following from the principle that "a woman is first and foremost a mother," the 1990s saw the introduction of Mother's Day and programs of support to young parents and students with children, while considerable sums were also invested in specialized women's and children's healthcare institutions. Surprisingly, whereas the problems of the family and childhood are often highlighted, the issues of the man's role and place, male-female partnership in the society and in the family, as well as recent changes in the fatherhood institution, which obviously involves a considerable part of Yakutia's men, are kept in the background.

Gender studies drawing on the data collected in the Republic are primarily centered on "female" aspects (Vinokurova et al. 2004; Vinokurova 2005). Men in contemporary Yakutia, regardless of ethnic background or social status, have practically been beyond the sphere of research interests. Meanwhile, according to the data provided by the State Committee of Statistics of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), 461,097, men constituting about 48 percent of the population, lived in Yakutia in 2007. There were 255,000 men between the ages of 20 and 55, the prime of physical and intellectual life among them.

According to official statistics, the sex ratio appears to be fully adequate and implies a certain gender balance. Unfortunately, a solid layer of implicit and explicit gender problems is hidden behind these numbers: in Yakutia, realization of the male social identity is challenged mostly due to unemployment, physical health condition, life expectancy, and limited chances for establishing familial and marital relations. The changes that have taken place in the socialization of men in the past 15 to 20 years are especially visible among representatives of all indigenous peoples.⁵

This paper draws upon the materials collected in villages with predominating Sakha population, but gender characteristics and informants' opinions, in practice, do not differ from those that had been gathered in the villages where representatives of the indigenous numerically small peoples of the North and Russian Arctic old settlers⁶ live. Therefore, we can speak about the men of rural Yakutia. In urban settlements with multi-ethnic population,⁷ gender-marked changes obviously have their own peculiarities.

Unfortunately, issues of male identity transformations in post-Soviet Yakutia have not been specifically studied, although they are quite topical: during the fieldwork conducted in several districts (*ulus*),⁸ Sakha men and men of numerically small indigenous groups express opinions about the transformation of the men's role. Whereas 15 to 20 years ago the overall lag of the youths and men of indigenous numerically small groups in contrast to the women of respective groups in terms of education and professional training, as well as the consequences of this lag, were discussed, nowadays they lament about "feminization" of all life. The following statement is quite typical:

Men have withdrawn into women's shadows; they [women] are everywhere; in offices, institutions, administrations. They not only work efficiently but have excluded men from everywhere; they direct and give orders! What is the situation in families now? It's often like this: the wife is somewhere in public or holds a prominent post, while the husband is occupied with the work on the household plot or in some private business. And what about public meetings or holidays? Come and see who predominates there and who occupies front-row seats! Women have filled everything around; they have tourist trips and attend entertainments

more often than men ... (Informant I.A., born in 1948, Churapchinskii District, 2006)

Such words might convey nostalgia for the recent past, when many patriarchal traits of familial relations were preserved. Even back in the Soviet period, men of the indigenous population of the Republic occupied a special place in the family hierarchy, especially in rural areas, in spite of all the social changes including women's emancipation. The father of the family or the oldest man continued to play a leading role in the family, associated with leadership and power. He was "the breadwinner and the hunter" and usually maintained the external connections of the family with other social entities (especially in a rural community). The man's reputation depended on his marital status (implying a close-knit family with many children and happy and successful members), his occupation, and his achievements. Of course, various, quite diverse models of the husband and the father, which could significantly differ from the ideal type mentioned above, have always existed.

Ethnic traditions in the sphere of family relations and relations between parents and children were most stable in rural areas. A first-generation urban Sakha man who has grown up in a village described the attitude to his father as follows:

Our parents have six children, a big and united family. The parents worked hard, and we helped them with the work in the fields and on the farm since infancy ... Every father's word is still a law for us. His wishes and requests are inarguably followed by everyone, even by our older brother S. [today a famous politician in the Republic]. Since childhood we have gotten used to Father playing a tremendous role in the family; he is still the main authority, even for Mother, a self-sufficient and self-confident woman. I think that is the way it should be ... (Informant N.N., born in 1956, Yakutsk, 2005).

Remarkably, the Yakut custom of asking "Whose daughter/son is this?" which has survived in the rural areas until the present day, implies, primarily, the father's name, place of residence, and occupation. Information about the mother, her occupation, and her status became

highly relevant in conversations in rural settings only in the last third of the 20th century (Informant M.I., born in 1928, Gornyi District, 2006).

The current situation in the Republic demonstrates changes in the gender sphere: these are, primarily, the changes that have taken place in the social behavior of women belonging to all ethnic groups in two recent decades. We can say that the crisis of the 1990s “provoked” the social activity of many women who turned out to be able to adapt to and act in drastically changing economic and political conditions. In the Republic during these years, the former gender order implying men’s leadership “by default” and their inarguable predominance in all vital spheres started changing. This complex process of changing gender roles and breaking stereotypes can be called “gender shift.” It is central to understanding social phenomena in the present-day Republic. It should be admitted that this process is rather multifaceted and unsteady, revealing itself differently in different age groups. Nevertheless, gender “rearrangements” are quite evident, especially in cases of national villages where they coincided with the period of survival and resistance to the crisis of the 1990s and an attempt to adapt to new conditions. Here, once-ingrained stereotypes concerning “male/female work,” and “male/female behavior” are challenged: women and men explicitly compete with each other not only on the roads, where an aboriginal woman driving a car has become quite a common phenomenon, but also at municipal elections, in fierce competitions for credits, and in grants for villagers. And this is surprising only to elderly people:

For example, my younger granddaughter says that when she graduates from the university, she gets involved in retail trade, as there are no jobs matching her specialization. She wants to use Grandmother’s old house as a shop and to hire village classmates as shop assistants, she says. These are the modern girls: they plan and make decisions themselves. They have become totally free, do the job that not every man can manage; they are not afraid of anything or anyone ...

(Informant G.B., born in 1931, Tattinskii District, 2006)

Men constitute around 50 percent of all population employed in the Republic’s economy. Such occupations as construction (made up of 81.6 percent men), the energy-and-gas industry (80% men), transportation and communications (76 percent men), extractive industries (71

percent men), and agriculture, fishing, hunting, and forestry (almost 66 percent men) remain the most “male” spheres of employment (Vinokurova 2007:85). At the same time, in the agricultural branches of industry and hunting, men of Sakha and indigenous numerically small groups prevail. However, the unemployment index is higher among men in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) than the average value across Russia (10.2 vs. 7.1). Men constitute around a half of the unemployed, prevailing numerically in elderly age groups. These are average official indices. In reality, young men’s employment level is very low not only in Sakha, Evenk, and Even villages but also among indigenous numerically small groups—Yukagirs and Russian old settlers (Safronov 1961, Gurvich 1966, Rasputin 2000, Chikachev 1990, 2007). In the villages, there are few jobs in the public sector and an underdeveloped entrepreneurship network. Low population density and underdeveloped infrastructure considerably limit opportunities for business. The lack of available credits closes the door to small business for rural men who have been involved in the subsistence economy for almost 15 years and have neither their own initial capital nor readiness for “short-term” and expensive credits.

In specific conditions of the North, the “Yakutian way” out of the mass male unemployment seems to lead in two directions. The first is intensive resource exploitation through development of indigenous traditional activities (animal husbandry, horse breeding, fishing, and folk arts and crafts of the Yakuts and other indigenous peoples of the North, including Russian Arctic Old Settlers) accompanied by the introduction of new forms of employment in the village. The second direction is relocation of the available unemployed labor force into other spheres and branches of the economy. Considering the fact that in the Republic 36 percent of unemployed men are individuals with a higher education and every third man has specialized secondary education, there should be efficient funding of and investments in new manufacturing enterprises.

Male unemployment in Yakutia is a historically new phenomenon not only from the Russian national perspective. For men of indigenous ethnic groups—Yakuts, Russian old settlers, and indigenous numerically small peoples of the North—labor was an inherent, integral part of life. Until the 1970s, in addition to workdays,⁹ all active time spent by men was spent on the ancestors’ arts and crafts. The man was often occupied with some useful work even during his leisure time, which was required in order to support household plot economy and to meet demands for domestic items and equipment. The figure of the adult man—working and always

occupied with some useful and necessary business for good of the family, the clan, and the village community—was undoubtedly significant and respected. It was a real leader with inarguable moral authority, or at least an ideal of the man that existed in rural areas back in the late 1970s—early 1980s.

In the traditional culture of the indigenous population, men held their own place, both in labor and education. The oldest men in the family or clan supervised familiarization of boys with labor and introduction to all “male” skills. Close intergenerational ties (sometimes connecting up to four generations of men, from the elderly great-grandfather to great-grandchildren) supported kinship and encouraged the spirit of family friendship. The favorable impact of such male solidarity on the self-esteem of both adult men and younger generations should be stressed.

In rural areas, the worthiness of the Yakut family had been judged by the “quality” of its men until the old family ideal ceased to exist. Its status in the local rural community significantly depended on the reputation of the father and adult sons. This is still evident in spite of the role of women in the family budget and implementation of family plans, which has increased during the past two decades. Up to the present day, the social prestige of the family in the Republic’s rural areas has been significantly determined by the industriousness of its men, their devotion to the family and children, their success in hunting and fishing, and their possession of some valuable knowledge and skills. The qualities clearly increase the marital attractiveness of the members of such family in the eyes of marriageable girls and eligible bachelors. Women’s life histories collected in 2001-2007 proved it.

It was discovered that the independent choice of a husband by a Yakut woman or acceptance of a proposal of marriage almost always considered the general evaluation of the clan’s or family’s men. Such statements as *"iuchiugei aimakh, iutiue iai"* (Yakut for “a good clan, a distinguished family”) served as very weighty arguments at ages older than 40 for contracting a marriage in rural communities. And, on the contrary, a bachelor with an attractive appearance and rather good educational and professional qualities could be rejected. There could be different reasons: for instance, a family disposition for internal discord and divorce (which some 15 to 20 years ago were perceived as a tragedy for all the clan). The woman could also be repulsed by frequent asocial behavior of men in the family, by a disposition for lying, stealing, etc., considered inherently immoral qualities according to traditional Sakha beliefs.

In addition to the quality, the quantity or number of men in the family and in the clan, of course, matters. The presence of adult men has always been a guarantee of the economic prosperity and well-being of families in rural areas. Physical labor as a basis for family economy, combined with the lack of comfortable living conditions in rural areas, makes the presence of men *desirable* in the context of an individual household or a house (author's emphasis). An autonomous household can be managed without men, but in the conditions of rural Yakutia, it takes supreme physical efforts by women. Haymaking, firewood procurement, animal husbandry, large-scale herding, hunting, and fishing, construction and maintenance work in the household, and motor transport make up an incomplete list of activities in which men's power and skills are required. Fishing, hunting, and grooming are challenging for a single breastfeeding mother, while building or renovating a log house without men's involvement are difficult for a pregnant woman. In ethnic villages, only women working in the public sector and having a stable salary or pension that affords paying for some services, or those relying on relatives' support, usually live alone. In most cases they have a very modest household plot with a vegetable garden, summer greenhouse, hens, etc.

Are there enough men in the ethnic villages in Yakutia? According to the 2002 Census, there were 1,000 men per 1,019 women in rural areas, which is more than the number registered by the previous Census in 1989, when the proportion was 1,000 men per 995 women (Ob itogakh Vserossiiskoi perepisi 2004:27). The reasons for decreasing male population in the northern resource frontier region, characterized by typical predominance of male labor, seem to be clear. They are usually connected with the mining-industry decrease during the crisis and with the resulting outflow of men's labor from the Republic (Vinokurova and Fedorova 2001:96-103). Workers with families, as well as those who had been employed in the social infrastructure, left the districts where industrial enterprises closed, and, therefore, male and female population decreased. According to Table 1, men have been numerically predominating in Oimiakonskii District, which may be explained by peculiarities of the population settlement pattern: this is a district with extreme temperatures and road conditions; men working or being placed in penitentiary institutions have historically prevailed among the local population. However, the data on rural areas of those districts where few people were involved in the mining industry also demonstrate a misbalanced ratio of male to female population. This can be explained both by

intensified migration of youth out of rural areas and by an increased mortality rate among men in the Republic.

Experts define the high mortality rate among men as “ultramortality” (Sukneva 2009). It is predetermined by men’s health condition, which is influenced by biological, natural, and social factors. Men’s health, to a large degree, depends on social environment and living conditions, including actual income, working hours and conditions, food patterns, housing, the quality of healthcare, the sanitary and epidemiological situation, and the predominating way of life.

Here we can say that the general quality of northerners’ lives, including the quality of food, does not satisfy modern requirements. Unbalanced diet, with an explicit predominance of carbohydrates and lipids and deficiency of the main nutrients (proteins, vitamins, microelements) results in a direct relation with the trend of growing alimentary dependence of such diseases as anemia (Informatsionnaia spravka 2007:1), obesity, disorders of the endocrine system and digestive apparatus, eating disorders, and metabolic imbalance.

There is a problematic epidemiological situation with tuberculosis in the Republic in spite of the decreased disease level, which was achieved thanks to the special program of immediate measures for tuberculosis prevention. There are many men suffering from tuberculosis (63 percent of the total number of patients) and oncological diseases. Among the individuals who are officially reported to have a drug addiction, 86 percent are male. Among alcoholics, 81 percent are male. According to the data from early 2007, men constituted 72.1 percent of the HIV-positive population (Informatsionnaia spravka 2007).

Table 1: Ratio of men to women in rural areas in the districts of Yakutia with mining enterprises, according to the 2002 Russian National Census (Ob itogakh Vserossiiskoi perepisi 2004:27-29)

	Total population according to 2002 Census	By gender, according to 2002 Census		Ratio of women to 1,000 men	Total population according to 1989 Census	By gender, according to 1989 Census		Ratio of women to 1,000 men
		Men	Women			Men	Women	

Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)	949,280	464,217	485,063	1,045	1,094,065	551,595	542,470	983
Rural areas (total)	339,281	168,062	171,219	1,019	362,102	181,478	180,624	995
Anabarskii D. (rural areas)	4,024	2,020	2,004	992	3,954	2,023	1,931	955
Verkhoianskii D. (rural areas)	7,300	3,790	3,510	926	8,137	4,328	3,809	880
Kobiaisikii D. (rural areas)	9,389	4,671	4,718	1,010	10,287	5,205	5,082	976
Lenskii District (rural areas)	5,428	2,703	2,725	1,008	9,181	4,743	4,438	936
Mirninskii D. (rural areas)	3,940	2,047	1,893	925	5,905	3,104	2,801	902
Nizhnekolymskii D. (rural areas)	2,100	1,059	1,041	983	2,545	1,323	1,222	924
Oimiakonskii D. (rural areas)	3,801	1,966	1,835	933	10,259	5,602	4,657	831
Olenekskii D. (rural areas)	4,091	2,054	2,037	992	4,011	1,976	2,035	1,030
Ust'-Maiskii D. (rural areas)	2,828	1,442	1,386	961	4,063	2,085	1,978	949

There are serious problems with the mortality rate among the working-age population in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Whereas in the early 1990s, working-age individuals constituted 44.3 percent of the total number of the deceased, in 2005 their proportion reached almost 48 percent. In other words, every second person dies at a creative and active age. The fact that mortality in this group has a sad “male face” causes special concerns: more than 60 percent of the total number of male deaths included men in the prime of life. The situation with the mortality among working-age male population in the Republic remains negative and resembles

the state of affairs in all other northern regions of the Russian Federation.

Mortality rates in the male population exceed those of the female population most markedly in the working-age group of 20 to 49. In this most vital and socially mature group, men die three to four times more often than their female peers. This ultramortality of men has been typical since the early 2000s (Table 2). There is an evident gap in mortality rates among men of different ages in Yakutia (i.e., young men vs. those who are in their forties and fifties), which so far has not been explained by doctors.

Table 2: Population and ultramortality index¹⁰ among men at the age of 20-40 in 2000 and 2004 (Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie 2006)

Age	2000		Index	2004		Index
	Men	Women		Men	Women	
20-24	6.1	1.3	4.69	5.8	1.3	4.46
25-29	6.9	1.8	3.83	6.2	1.5	4.13
30-34	8.7	2.0	4.35	7.7	2.3	3.35
35-39	9.4	2.8	3.36	10.2	3.3	3.09
40-44	10.9	3.6	3.03	13.2	4.3	3.07
45-49	15.5	5.5	2.82	17.5	5.3	3.30

In Yakutia, peculiarities of mortality among men at an active age are, to a significant degree, predetermined by social factors where alcoholism plays a special role. For instance, injuries and criminal deaths are characteristic of the general structure of the causes of death of the able-bodied male population in the Republic. It should be pointed that in the countries with favorable indices of occupational and criminal traumatism, such causes of death rank third, after the circulatory system and oncological diseases. In Yakutia, accidents, poisoning, injuries, murders, and suicides result in 42.3 percent of the general number of deaths in young (before 35) male age groups. Cardiovascular diseases as a cause of death account for only one third (29.5 percent) of cases (Spravka o polozhenii muzhchin 2007).

Table 3: Male mortality by individual classes of causes of death in 1990-2004 (per 1,000)

(Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie 2006)

Causes of death	1990	2004
Total	676.8	956.3
Including		
Infectious and parasitic diseases	14.1	15.0
Neoplasms	123.3	130.6
Circulatory system diseases	231.3	375.8
Respiratory diseases	41.2	42.7
Digestive system diseases	26.4	45.1
Accidents, injuries, poisoning, murders, and suicides	166.3	240.1

Murders (23 percent) and suicides (19.7 percent) prevail in the Republic's statistics of violent mortality. We are quite concerned about a growing number of criminal deaths: while 27 murders per 100,000 people were registered in Yakutia in 1990, approximately 50 deaths per 100,000 people are registered today. The number of suicides almost doubled: from 25 cases per 100,000 people in the 1990s to 47–49 cases in recent years. Moreover, men commit suicide five times more often than women. Men, including Yakuts and representatives of indigenous numerically small peoples of the North at the youngest ages, account for the majority of suicides; they also constitute a significant proportion of victims and murderers.

Remarkably, the ethnic aspect of crime is largely neglected in Yakutia. Interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) conducted in 2005-06 showed that there is an insignificant number of Sakha and representatives of the indigenous numerically small peoples of the North in the records of economic and transportation crimes and copyrights violations. For instance, the chronicle of crimes in Yakutsk shows that residents of ethnic villages are primarily found in situations characterized by “drunk” hooligan aggressiveness and violation of public order in the city. Asocial behavior is quite often based on purely social factors—the difficulty of adapting to an alien environment and cultural and

language barriers faced by individuals coming from ethnic villages to the city. Continuous growth in criminality among this group is further evidence of social problems.

Against the background of the unfavorable mortality situation, the average life expectancy in the Republic is lower than in the Russian Federation as a whole. In 1990-91, life expectancy in the Republic was 66.5—62.0 for men and 71.3 for women. In Russia as a whole, these indices were 69.0, 63.5, and 74.3, respectively. In the 2000s the average life expectancy of men fluctuated around 58: in 2001 it equaled 58.4; in 2002, 58.9; in 2003, 58.1, etc., with the number presently being still below 59. Obviously, the planned life expectancy among men in Yakutia has not reached age 70, as recommended by the World Health Organization: in the 21st century it is still ten years less than this number. The actual situation is, when you travel around small villages in the areas of traditional settlement of the Sakha, you find many middle-aged and elderly women who have been widows for many years. Our survey, which was conducted in 2002-04 in several villages and included 800 women, showed that every fifth woman older than 60 was a widow. This is likely why Yakut men are said to “widow wives.” Unfortunately, such a situation is typical for Russia as a whole. While in metropolitan areas male mortality can be explained by the impact of stressors, and in industrial areas by pronounced ecological problems, in agricultural taiga villages in Yakutia some other explanations should obviously be found.

Men doom women to loneliness (or women doom men to loneliness?) already during their lifetime. They are gradually separated by the growing distance of alienation, which supplants the long-lived tradition of partnership within the marriage and family. According to our informants, in the 1950-60s, divorces were extremely rare in villages; their number increased in the 1970-80s; and later they became common. In rural districts with indigenous populations—for example, in Ust'-Aldanskii District—the coefficient of marriage stability (the number of divorces per 100 registered marriages) was 12 in 1970, 12.4 in 1980, 33.3 in 1992, and 27.1 in 2004. In the same period, the present has grown from 2.1 to 40.4 in Suntarskii District, and from 8.7 to 23.3 in Churapchinskii District. In the Republic as a whole, this index was 60.4 in 2004—that is, it doubled since 1970 (Barashkova 2009: 151). The values of the necessary marriage and the family with both parents and children were undermined back in the late Soviet period with the growing number of nuclear families, disappearance of extended families even in rural areas, and mass spread of such phenomena as a single mother relying on state support. The social and cultural consequences of the crisis of the 1990s aggravated the alienation of men and women

from each other, replacing the long-lived norms of mutual and respectful interest and partnership. As our informant I.N. said: “In the past, the woman knew that she would necessarily get married and have children. The men knew that he would need to have his house, a wife, and children. They both knew that they would have to feed, bring up, and teach children to be adequate and useful people. Many things have changed by now. There are many young men who would treat young girls and women rather as toys than as prospective mothers of their children. There are women who seem to be doing well without husbands...” (Informant I.N., born in 1940, Tattinskii District, 2005). This straightforward observation reflects the gender shift that has taken place in Yakutian society in recent decades.

Such phenomena as the mass spread of so-called civil marriage (*grazhdanskii brak*), the considerable growth in the number of illegitimate children (previously characteristic of the population of the Republic’s industrial settlements and temporary workers’ bases), and the celibacy of men and women at the most active and employable age have dramatically spread in Yakutian society. According to our observations, the number of single mothers has increased by almost 20 percent in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in the past ten years. Ethnically mixed marriages, which appear to be less stable in comparison to others, are not decreasing in number. Presently, such marriages are contracted not only with Russian citizens of different ethnic backgrounds, but also with partners from the “near” and “far abroad.”¹¹ Mercenary interests—“legalization” of a non-local spouse, business interests, etc.—frequently serve as a basis for such marriages. These marriages, as well as those in which spouses could not match their cultural differences, dissolve easier and more often. In some settlements, women of indigenous numerically small peoples of the North in 70 to 90 percent of cases marry representatives of other ethnic groups or have an illegitimate child of ethnically mixed origin. By the early 2000s, the marriage rate had drastically dropped in the northern districts of the Republic with predominantly aboriginal populations (Sakha and indigenous numerically small peoples of the North): from 40 percent to 66 percent, against the average decrease of 28.6 percent in the Republic overall (Vinokurova et al. 2004:195).

The crisis of the Yakutian family is also reflected in the official statistics: families dissolve too often. At the turn of the 21st century, the situation with divorces was on the verge of a catastrophe: seven to eight marriages were registered per 1,000 people in the Republic, along with up to five divorces. The situation has been slowly improving, but the indices of more

favorable (in terms of statistics) Soviet times remain unattainable. Whereas in the early 1980s, ten marriages and four divorces per 1,000 were registered in the Republic, in 2007 the same number of four divorces but only seven marriages were registered.

People stopped appreciating each other; everything has been devalued ... Now newlyweds get divorced before you have time to wish them well. There are not any authorities for them. They don't care a fig about the opinions of old men and others or even about the expenses incurred by the relatives to organize and conduct their weddings. They don't even appreciate a newborn baby, treating him as a toy without thinking about his soul or his future. (Informant G.B., born in 1931, Tattinskii District, 2006. He said he has been living a happy married life for more than 40 years)

As experts remark, divorces are especially painful for men, for whom they are comparable to a personal "mini-death" and equivalent to the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. Even if they result from an unhappy marriage, they are always stressful. All the more so considering the fact that for men, getting divorced means not only leaving a wife but, in most cases, losing children. As everywhere in Russia, after the divorce a child or children stay primarily with the mother, according to the existing practice, which dooms the man to the status of a totally socially deprived individual. This is in spite of the equal rights of spouses, both women and men, to exercise parental rights in accordance with the existing Russian legislation (Semeinyi kodeks 2010).

Nevertheless, 64.1 percent of working men in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) are officially married, and around 8 percent are married unofficially; that is, 72 percent of men come home from work to a matrimonial home. Even considering an unregistered percentage of men who are formally married but actually have a second family or a girlfriend, this is a rather considerable index, with the potential for growth. According to official records, presently almost 49,000 adult working men have never been married.

The share of illegitimate children in the Republic has doubled since the 1990s: almost every third child is illegitimate. The introduction of so-called maternity capital—an opportunity for receiving guaranteed monetary compensation after the birth of the second child, which can be

used for buying housing or paying for the child's education—encourages some women to give birth to a second or third child, even without a husband. In some ethnic villages, the proportion of illegitimate children reaches 60 percent.

It should be admitted that the role of the man as a father is underestimated in Russia as a whole. Such neglect is especially dangerous against the backdrop of the general crisis of the family in Russia. Yakutian experts think that the time is ripe to reconsider the man's role in the family and reassess fatherhood in terms of formation and development of the child's personality and organization of adequate living conditions for every family member (Popov 2000; Protopopov 2007; Starostina 2007). In the years following the crisis of the 1990s, the status and authority of the man as a family head and a father changed considerably. It can be said that the former social authority of the man within the family has faded into insignificance. The phenomenon of disintegrating traditional values is characteristic for the whole North, where the binding thread of time started to unravel long ago, and the cultural continuity between generations is disrupted on the level of individual clans and families.

In the traditional pre-Soviet culture of the indigenous peoples of Yakutia, particularly among Sakha, a lot of attention was paid to the upbringing of boys, primarily to the development of "purely male" character. Such personal qualities as courage, selflessness, and persistence in attaining one's goal were considered to be the main virtues of the aboriginal man. The bearer of the family name had to be a tireless toiler, an optimist who could secure the future, and a keeper of the family history and clan values. This was obviously sufficient for living in the agricultural and hunting world. At the same time, the spirit of enterprise and good luck and success in business were also highly appreciated in traditional Sakha society, as reflected in the folkloristic layer of proverbs and sayings. Why and when these qualities stopped being relevant is another question claiming special attention.

At present, economic self-dependence ranks rather low in the hierarchy of the fundamental values of men in the Republic; often, men are poorly prepared for entrepreneurial activities. As Yakutian sociologists point out, the majority of indigenous individuals lack social ambitions and motivation for career growth and for active vertical, or at least horizontal, migrations (Serguchev 2004:34). Our observations show that indigenous men, especially in middle or old age, are characterized by a marked aversion to changing their place of residence, by a passive inclination for the habitual way of life. These features might reflect the lack of

historical experience of market relations among the indigenous population that was living in the conditions of the pre-Soviet patriarchal lifestyle or socialism during the whole past century. In any case, such passive positions of indigenous men suggest the problems of employment and competitiveness in the labor market. In particular, the general lack of working experience and necessary qualification required at industrial and transportation enterprises do not rule out the same kind of situation experienced by aboriginals of Alaska and the Northwest Territories of Canada, who could not turn into skilled workers in the oil-and-gas and transportation industries developing on their traditional territories. Today, the labor force from different regions of the Russian Federation and from abroad is largely involved in the construction of a railroad and a continental gas pipeline on the Republic's territory; the local population is thus far employed in preparatory and auxiliary jobs only.

The post-Soviet decline in the labor (financial, professional, career, and other) self-sufficiency of men decreased their attractiveness in the eyes of indigenous brides among the Sakha and indigenous numerically small peoples of the North. For many men representing Sakha and other indigenous groups, losing the status of the breadwinner means losing the status of the man in general. Whereas earlier, a misbalanced ratio of "bachelors vs. marriageable girls" in rural ethnic groups was explained by the discrepancy in the level of education and cultural habits, continued distancing of men and women from each other has recently been witnessed. It may have psychological reasons, as explained by an informant:

Now no one needs anyone. Money and possessions matter today. For example, which girl from our village is going to marry my son? He is a good, healthy, and handsome guy, but he is not grasping and not longing for money, not of that modern sort. It's a different time now, a time of roughs and scroungers. All girls are eager to leave for the city to study or work. Everybody wants to marry tough, rich men, like those stars on TV: stars, deputies, successful men, even if they're gangsters. Everyone wants everything immediately—no one wants to build, to save, and to lose anything and then to hope again ... (Informant P.N., born in 1952, Megino-Kangalasskii District, 2006)

Yet this observation contradicts the results of our research conducted in the 2000s. They show that the overwhelming majority of indigenous women are quite modest in their demands in relation to their potential partner; they are tolerant of weaknesses, not expecting their partner to be a superman, and ready to help him in education, employment, etc. Does that mean that women and men in Yakutia have lost the ability to hear each other?

The recently intensified social movement of men who have met the challenges of the era with dignity suggests optimism in the sphere of men's interests. Joint efforts and initiation of social projects with the male and the "manly face" have become distinctive marks of life in many ethnic villages and districts.

Men there have become active in the sphere of children's upbringing: the practice of teaching boys traditional activities—hunting, fishing, crafts, and developmental physical exercises—is being revived through fathers' councils and parents' unions. Men's public organizations initiate development of folk arts and crafts as an opportunity for developing small enterprises and increasing employment among men.

Men manufacture domestic utensils, furniture, hunting equipment, and provisions for work on the individual household plot and making hay, wooden handicrafts and items of bone and elk's antlers. Men's "appeal to the past," to those spheres where individuality and relative human freedom have always been preserved, seem to be symbolic. Such public activity is positively evaluated by representatives of both genders among all indigenous peoples and diasporas from the Newly Independent States living in the Republic.

At the 2008 meeting of the Yakutian League of Men (established in spring 2007) delegates from district-level men's associations expressed general concerns, which can be summarized as follows: a) there is an acute problem of unemployment among men, especially young men in rural areas; b) the situation with families and marriages in ethnic villages causes serious concerns; c) urgent measures for preservation of traditional family values are required. Men expressed their willingness to preserve ethnic traditions in the Republic and to support the culture of fatherhood and manhood. Not only imposing and well-established men attended the meeting; there were also quite young students, entrepreneurs, white-collar workers, and teachers—men who, obviously, want to live a positive, rich, and appropriate life.

Observations of the activity of men's public organizations suggest that this activity was initiated on the basis of the bottom-up principle: self-organization of men was taking place at the

level of small settlements and some villages. This provides grounds for assuming that some individuals and small rural communities reserve a certain amount of energy and have a willingness for successful adaptation to the changing environment. It should be noted that men address the heritage of ethnic cultures, employing it as some sort of spiritual support and trying to adjust their ancestors' knowledge and skills according to the call of the times. Men, of course, are not some homogeneous mass: quite diverse models of male behavior coexist in the Republic. There is a very wide range of assessments and opinions regarding the contemporary gender situation among the men surveyed and interviewed. The personal qualities of these people also vary from passive and parasitic individuals to successful men who have realized their potential and skills. The "collective portrait" of Yakutia's men appears to be rather contradictory: it combines social apathy with the energy of labor and creativity, and combines indifference to one's own health and fate with the willingness to live a full life, to compete and cooperate with other men and women in various spheres.

Notes

¹ Translated by Olga Povoroznyuk.

² In 1992 the erstwhile Yakut ASSR, located in the northeastern part of Siberia, has been officially renamed into Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and the Yakuts' ethnic self-designation Sakha is now also officially used as ethnonym. We make use of both of these terms in the translation of Lilia Vinokurova's article. In most cases, "Yakutian" is used with reference to the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) rather than to the ethnic group (editors' note).

³ An ethnic village (Russian: *natsional'nyi poselok*) is a settlement the population of which predominantly belongs to one of the indigenous peoples of the North of Russia (translator's note).

⁴ In Russia, 2008 was declared the Year of the Family (author's note).

⁵ Among the indigenous peoples of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), there are the Sakha (Yakuts)—the largest of all indigenous groups—and several of the so-called numerically small indigenous peoples of the North: Evenks, Evens, Dolgans, Chukchi, and Yukagirs (editors' note).

⁶ The legal status of Russian Arctic old settlers is similar to that of the indigenous population. Cf. the Law of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) "O rasprostraneniі položenii Federal'nogo Zakona ot 30 apreliā 1999 goda #82-FZ "O garantiakh prav korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii" na russkikh arkticheskikh starozhilov Yakutii (pokhodchan i

russtkoust'intsev) ["On Application of the Provisions of Federal Law #82 of 30 April 1999 "On the Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples of the Russian Federation" to Russian Arctic Old Settlers of Yakutia (Pokhodchane and Russtkoust'intsy)"]

⁷ The 2002 Russian National Census showed that representatives of more than 120 of 142 ethnic groups registered in the census program in Russia as a whole live permanently in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). As in the previous Census (1989), the list of most numerous ethnic groups includes Russians, Sakha, Ukrainians, Tatars, Evenks, Belorussians, Evens, and Buriats (Natsional'nyi sostav 2009).

⁸ The Sakha word *ulus* is used in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) for administrative units that in other parts of the Russian Federation are called *raion*. We translate it henceforward as district (editors' note).

⁹ Workday: a unit of work used on collective farms to measure the employees' operating time (translator's note).

¹⁰ Ultramortality index is calculated as a ratio of the male mortality rate to female mortality rate (Sukneva 2007: 51).

¹¹ "Near abroad" (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*): a Russian term for the former republics of the Soviet Union, as opposed to the rest of the world, which is "far abroad" (*dal'nee zarubezh'e*). These terms reflect rather historical, cultural and political ambitions of the Russian Federation for domination in the post-soviet space, than actual geographic positions of the countries (editor's note).

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