

*Women Without Men. Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia* by Jennifer Utrata. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2015. 288 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$79.95, hard bound. \$29.95, paper.

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In Russia, single motherhood is normalized, rather than problematized and it is that normalization which *Women without Men* explains. This book is a sociological study of single motherhood in today's Russia. It employs an intersectional approach and considers single motherhood as a subject position constructed in relation to others and imprinted by the practices and understandings of ex-husbands, boyfriends, friends, married women, and most significantly, grandmothers. Jennifer Utrata's work both sheds light on the life choices, constraints and opportunities that are available to Russian single mothers and simultaneously problematizes the discursive framework of western (mostly American) sociological studies of single motherhood. She relies on extensive ethnographic data to detail Russian single motherhood and to question both common assumptions about Russian single mothers in particular, and sociological work in general on single motherhood.

Utrata starts her book by providing the reader with a historical context, focusing on how state support and social stigma has changed for single mothers as the Soviet state dissolved and Russia entered into market capitalism. She then writes about the positive narratives of independence she gathered from her informants, who at the same time repeatedly told her about their dreams of finding a strong and dependable man. In chapter 3, Utrata contextualizes these individual narratives against the current social pressure to provide for oneself and be a financially successful individual (rather than relying on state support of the family as during Soviet times). This neoliberal 'self-reliance' discourse—the need to be a successful breadwinner while also raising children in a social context that does not provide adequate child care or domestic support—sets the stage for one of Russian single motherhood's primary actors: the maternal grandmother, or *babushka*, who is the topic of chapter 4. This chapter clearly illustrates what one of her informants had said in an interview: That a Russian woman without a *babushka* is truly a single mother. Utrata then writes about married mothers' situations in light of her reflections of single motherhood (chapter 5) and mens' responses to absent fatherhood (chapter 6). In her concluding chapter, she reflects on what she calls a normalized gender crisis and the fluidity of family formation as Russia has embraced capitalism.

In addition to thoroughly delivering on the promise of an empirically rich study, this book is also impressive in that it employs an intersectional approach. In practice, this means that the author has not just addressed the issue of single motherhood from the point of view of the single mothers. She also shows us the image of the single mother from the point of view of married women, grandmothers (the *babushka*) and the fathers—who have largely been left out of the family constellation upon divorce. Thus, Utrata also addresses the implications single motherhood has for other subject positions in the practice of single motherhood. Most revealing for the study was the chapter that allowed grandmothers to be analysed. Over and over in this chapter, and throughout the book if one looks for it, Utrata's work problematized the assumption that a husband, current or divorced, is the primary partner for women in the family constellation. Rather, it became very clear that childrearing in Russia is done in partnership with the (usually maternal) grandmother,

and a study of single motherhood that defines single as divorced from the children's father is not as relevant as a study of women raising children without the maternal grandmother would be. Thus, Utrata's approach importantly problematizes the analytical concept of single motherhood when family is defined through the hetero-normative binary.

This book is well written, well researched, and a welcome contribution to sociological studies of life in Russia, in particular of Russian women. It also takes a large step in opening up studies of single motherhood to intersectional analysis. However its comparative element falls a bit flat by predominantly comparing the Russian case with studies of single motherhood in the US (occasionally referred to as the West). While Utrata convincingly argues that single motherhood is very different in the two contexts, it would have been even more interesting to compare Russian single motherhood with the position offered to single parents within a structural framework that is the very opposite of that found in Russia. For example, in Sweden, shared custody is automatically granted to both parents upon divorce. Many children spend every other week with their father, and fathers are both legally and socially expected to take active responsibility for the financial and emotional needs of their children, including the daily household labor associated with care. A case like this would have more readily problematized many of the analytical assumptions currently found in academic work on single motherhood by forcing a stronger critique of the term "single mother" and articulating the gendered assumptions about care and their structural implications, which prevent the possibility of a gender neutral version of single parenthood—in Russia and in the US. Aside from this small criticism, *Women Without Men* is otherwise an outstanding book and a valuable contribution for academics in Russian studies, postsocialism, and the sociology of the family.