

“Women Rule This Country”: Women’s Community Organizing and Care in Rural Karelia

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Abstract

Especially after the recent reform of the local self-government, Russian municipalities suffer from insufficient resources to provide well-being for their citizens. Resolutions to local social problems are sought by mixing state and non-state efforts. These efforts are carried out predominantly at a grassroots level by women from the public and voluntary sectors. The article discusses women’s community organizing in several villages of a municipal district in Russian Karelia in the 2000s; thus, it focuses on the understudied, but very elementary, level of government from the viewpoint of citizens on the borders of Russia. Drawing on the ethnographic data, I show that community activism relies on middle-aged and well-educated women holding a good position in municipal institutions. Thus, the roles of the activists and administrators blur, which makes the sharp division, predominant in the scholarly literature, between the state and civil society misleading. New forms of agency compete, coexist, or merge with old Soviet practices of social support and activism. I suggest that the logic of action of this women’s community organizing relies mainly on the domestic, civic, and inspired orders described by Boltanski and Thévenot (2001).

Keywords: Care, Civil Society, Community Organizing, Karelia, Rural Municipalities, Russia, Women’s Activism

Tamara is waiting for me at her work place, the village’s neat House of Culture; she has made all the wall paintings and other embellishments by herself. Tamara is in her mid-forties and has been working at the House of Culture since her arrival to this village. She was not born here, not even in Karelia, but with the Soviet system typically sending professionals to work in the periphery, she moved here from afar after finishing her cultural studies at her home university. Nevertheless, she stayed and got married—as she explained, it was not difficult to find a husband in a village that lives from sovkhoz cattle-raising, where “sovkhoz guys were sitting on the tractors and picking up their wives among ‘sent-away girls’ coming to the village.”

Besides her permanent job as the director of the House of Culture, which is being responsible for cultural events and activities of the village, she—with a couple of other active women—runs on a voluntary basis multiple clubs for villagers, both children and adults. She says the House of Culture is open 24 hours a day. Her salary is low and the voluntary work, naturally, unpaid; she claims that enthusiasm keeps her going and is her primary engine—she enjoys being able to create and use her imagination. She jokes—laughing out loud as she always does—that she would rather pay to be able to work than to do nothing. “That’s how crazy I am,” she sniggers. Besides being able to practice her talents, she feels responsibility to arrange some meaningful leisure activities for the villagers—to make them spend time without beer.

She is a member of a small local women’s group, which seems to run most of the activities in the village. Despite the moral support and some tiny material donations, the local administration is not able to support any of these activities. Tamara is also a member of the local

*settlement council. Her voluntary activism (obshchestvennaia rabota) stems from Soviet times. As noted, she has always been active; she has a proactive attitude (aktivnaia zhiznennaia pozitsiia).*¹

After the collapse of the socialist welfare system, the Russian state has withdrawn from and been unable to carry out its responsibilities in the field of social services. Many activities earlier performed by the paternalist state have been undertaken within civil society, which seems to be a sphere of women (cf. Jalusic 2002; Johnson 2006; Koukarenko, forthcoming 2010; Kulmala 2008a; Phillips 2008; Salmenniemi 2008a; Sperling 2006). After the recent reform of the local self-government (*mestnoe samoupravlenie*)², Russian municipalities suffer from insufficient resources to provide well-being for their citizens. Resolutions to local social problems are sought by mixing state and non-state efforts. New forms of agency compete, coexist, or merge with old Soviet practices of social support and activism. Thus, despite huge societal change since the collapse of the Soviet system, there is continuity, too; many structures and agents have remained the same (cf. Kay, forthcoming 2010; Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2004; Ristolainen 2008; Sätre 2001; Wegren 2006; White 2004).

This article discusses women's activism in the villages within the Sortavala municipal district of Russian Karelia in the 2000s.³ Russian small towns or villages in general, and particularly the development of their civil society and welfare systems, have not been at the center of academic research within Russian studies. Nevertheless, they deserve attention, since the picture of Russia is incomplete if we look only at Moscow, St. Petersburg, or even the regional capitals; some 40 percent of Russians live in small towns and villages (RSE 2006). Furthermore, as some scholars (see e.g. Cook and Vinogradova 2006; White 2006; Wegren 2006) have noted, a potential of civil society in contemporary Russia might be at the community level. These activities, seemingly paradoxically, also follow old Soviet patterns. This article focuses on this understudied but very elementary level of the local state, which is the closest locus for citizens to interact with the state. Furthermore, it is an elementary level from the viewpoint of citizens also because most of the services are provided or delivered at the local level.

In this article, I first briefly introduce the Sortavala municipal district as a site of my field study. Second, I discuss the predominant understanding of civil society⁴ applied in many previous studies of Russian civil society, which in my estimation fail to explain voluntary activism in Russia. I suggest that with the theory of different orders of worth introduced by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006), one can capture some essential logics of activism in different cultural contexts. Below, I shall seek to tie the concept of care in Western feminist literature to this approach, since the voluntary activism that I have studied within the Sortavala district is oriented to social welfare and falls on the shoulders of women. Drawing on the ethnographic data collected within four settlements of the Sortavala district, I show that community activism relies on middle-aged and well-educated women who have a good position in their communities. The roles of voluntarily active women and administrators overlap, which makes a sharp division between the state and civil society misleading. These women carry a remarkable role in providing activities and services for their fellow villagers. Perhaps this role is even more essential after the recent municipal reform that created the lower-level independent municipal units at the settlement level; these administrative units are responsible for many local issues but do not have sufficient resources. I call these women "community organizers" (Stall and Stoecker 1998), by which I mean the efforts they make for their communities on a voluntary and professional basis.

Sortavala District As a Site of the Ethnographic Field Study

After the municipal reform, the Sortavala district is one of 16 Karelian municipal districts, with a population of 34,200. It comprises three urban settlements: Sortavala (a town with 20,800 inhabitants), Kheliulia (3,700), and Viartsilia (3,100), as well as two rural settlements, Khaapalampi (3,500) and Khaalamo (3,300).⁵ The data in this article were collected in the four latter settlements. The district is located just on the border of Finland and, in fact, was a part of Finland until the end of the World War II.⁶ Finnish influence is still visible, for instance in numerous Finnish-Russian joint projects—most of which take place in the town of Sortavala. Recently, though, tendencies to establish projects at the village level have also appeared.

Each settlement, i.e. lower-level municipal unit, has certain responsibilities and powers. Their governing structures include the bodies of a municipal head, a local administration (executive body), and a municipal council (elected, representative body). After the creation of these lower-level municipalities, the number of elected female municipal heads at that level as well as in municipal councils has increased. In Russia, as in many other countries, administrative positions at the municipal level are considered less prestigious than the upper-level governments and, thus, less desirable for men and more accessible for women (e.g. Dahlerup 1988; Holli et al. 2007; Kudriashova and Koukarenko 2003).⁷ In the municipal bodies of the Sortavala district, women are rather well represented: in 2007, one of the five settlements had a female head, and none of the settlement councils contained fewer than half female members; out of six councils, two were chaired by women.⁸ The work of the local councilors is hardly considered political but rather very practical, problem-solving for the common good, which is often identified as feminine, while upper-level politics are considered masculine (cf. Sperling et al. 2001). These local councilors are elected not according to their memberships in any political party but because they represent their own neighborhood: voters know who they are and trust them (cf. Gel'man 2007; Koveneva 2008; White 2004). Interestingly, many of my informants saw the role of the United Russia (*Edinaia Rossiia*) party as an administrative, not political, resource; according to them, the party draws more members among the administrative officials than the elected councilors. Both men and women often explained that even if political parties were active, they all would focus on the very same practical issues, namely the improvement of the living conditions of the dwellers. As one of the local councilors said, wanting to emphasize this unsubstantial difference between the political parties at the local level: "Everyone could join a party 'For Our Welfare.'"

The poor financial standing of the settlements is one of the most serious problems in all of the settlements of the district.⁹ No large-scale industries operate within the district, and most of the state enterprises and *sovkhozes* broke down with the collapse of the Soviet Union. These settlements lack resources even to take care of all their responsibilities, defined by the new law. Their heads expressed that, per year, they are able to carry out only one of the tasks in the long list. One of them described how he had had to start from zero: due to almost non-existent resources, he only had an empty office. He bought equipment, such as a computer and mobile phone, with his own money to start the work. The current worldwide economic crisis hit these Karelian municipalities hard; their already small or deficit budgets have shrunk by almost half.

Many social problems, such as poverty, alcoholism, drug use, social exclusion, domestic violence, and idleness, are very much present. However, these problems raise common concern among the locals, and draw dwellers to help the local administrations with their resolution.

Resources are combined and sought from every possible source; blurred efforts of the public and voluntary sectors are a common practice (see also Kulmala, forthcoming 2010a).

During my fieldwork, I observed a high degree of voluntary activism performed by women. As a starting point, my primary questions arose from this empirical observation, and were as follows: Who are these women? What do they do? What agenda do they have? Here, my aim is to conceptualize this women's activism. Next, I shall draw a theoretical frame for my analysis.

About Theorizing Civil Society, Women's (Voluntary) Activism, and Care

Often, Western—particularly Anglo-American—scholars of Russian civil society investigate Russian state-society relations from the viewpoint of the liberal model. In this model, the main function of civil society is to represent a critical counterweight of the state, an independent realm “against the state.” Thus, state and non-state agents are considered separate from each other. In these analyses, a prevalent conclusion is that there is no “Western-type” civil society in Russia—a statement that, in my opinion, refers to this liberal model. Furthermore, the Russian model, in contrast to the liberal design, is usually interpreted as statist, which means that Russian civil society lacks independence and is co-opted by the state (e.g. Evans 2006; Hale 2002).¹⁰ By analyzing Russian civil society in inherently Western terms, several studies have pointed out shortcomings and underdevelopments of Russian civil society rather than go into the nature of Russian activism (Koveneva 2008). From my viewpoint, a more fruitful approach to understanding the nature of civil-society activities is to investigate them in their own context—instead of having any preconceived models, be they liberal or of any other theoretical construction—as a starting point. For this kind of closer look, ethnographic methods provide a fruitful possibility (Kulmala 2010).

From my point of view, reconsidering boundaries between the state and non-state agents and activities is inevitable, as my research in Russian Karelia shows that the boundaries of the public, i.e. state, and voluntary, i.e. civil-society, sectors blur. The conceptual separation between the state and society is too reductive, since my research shows that local politicians and civil servants are active in their communities also on a voluntary basis (cf. Kay, forthcoming 2010; Kulmala, forthcoming 2010a). In addition, in Karelia, the presence of multiple Finnish-Russian joint projects has led to a comparatively strong emphasis on cooperative relations between the state and civil society sectors (Kulmala, forthcoming 2010a, 2010b). Furthermore, in my case study, the overlaps between these two sectors are purposefully built.

It is for these and other reasons (to be explained below) that I prefer to theorize the activities of these women as *community organizing* rather than *social activism*, since the latter term refers so strongly to Western, liberal understandings of civil society. Thus, I seek to apply the women-centered model of community organizing that has been put forward by Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker (1998). Community organizing refers to the entire processes of organizing relationships, identifying issues, and mobilizing around those issues (Stall and Stoecker 1998). Thus, instead of creating conflicts, the term puts emphasis on the creation and maintenance of relationships, which is a sharp contrast to conflict-oriented theories on Western, liberal, civil societies. Stall and Stoecker link their women-centered model to the social-movement theories. According to the authors, behind every successful social movement is a community or network of communities. Community organizing is localized, often “pre-political” action that serves as a foundation of multilocal and explicitly political social movements. As I will show, women in

rural Karelia are engaged in a Karelia-wide women's movement (also Kulmala, forthcoming 2010a).

In Russian, the forms of voluntary activism that I study are labeled as *obshchestvennyi*, which is often translated into English as *social*. However, I avoid using the terms "social activism" or "social activists," which I feel are strongly associated with the above-discussed liberal design of civil society. In order to avoid these associations, I call these women "community organizers" and their acts "community organizing." Nevertheless, I do see these kinds of activities and activism as civil-society activism.¹¹ This community organizing is strongly committed to social welfare, and, therefore, it is social—with respect to being socially oriented.

This women's community organizing thus connects with the concept of care, which is most often seen outside the political realm—either below politics (in a prepolitical sense) or above politics (in an apolitical sense) (Tronto 1996). However, feminist scholars of care have problematized the extrapolitical nature of care: many questions related to care—for instance, who gets what care, where, when, how, and why—are highly political. Sortavala community organizers associate their voluntary activism with an obligation to help (cf. Ledeneva 1998; Lonkila 2009). This obligation intersects with womanhood and motherhood; community activism is explained as a female responsibility for others. Mothers are fighting for the better well-being not only of their families but of their communities. Thus, this feminine care-work reaches out from the private concerns to the community level, to the public. Following several feminist scholars, I do not see this female care-oriented activism as only apolitical and as practical; it also becomes public and thus political (Gilligan 1982; Lister 1997; Tronto 1996; Webner 1999). Furthermore, women's local and practical resistance in the sphere of civil society is often not seen as politics; as Valerie Sperling et al. (2001) argued, the politics itself is defined on a gendered basis—institutional politics, dominated by men, is the only type of activity that counts as political. I support the authors' suggestion that civic activism, whether in Russia or elsewhere, is a political activity.

As noted, my aim is to understand the nature of the studied civil-society activism in its own context rather than to read it in Western terms, i.e. in terms of assumptions deriving from the Western civil-society theories. Analyses from these perspectives have created pessimistic pictures and rather sharp juxtapositions of "Western-type" and "Russian-type" civil societies. In these analyses, "Western-type" activism seems to be somewhat superior and "right," in contrast to the Russian one. In order to escape from these juxtapositions, I consider the theory of different logics of common action developed by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) as a fruitful approach to understanding the nature of and constructing the logics for this socially oriented feminine community organizing (cf. Colin-Lebedev 2009; Koneva 2008).¹² This theory describes six different orders of worth behind people's actions: 1) inspired worth; 2) domestic worth; 3) worth of fame; 4) civic worth; 5) market worth; and 6) industrial worth. Let me briefly characterize these different orders of worth.

The inspired order refers to the value of spontaneous creation and is associated with creativity, enthusiasm, passion, emotions, and irrationality; the relevant beings are, for example, religious devotees, artists, children, or crazy people. Domestic worth places value on the tradition and proximity of relationships, which rest on personal dependencies and hierarchies. Such qualities as trustworthiness, personal ties, local attachments, and authority are valued; worthy persons would be, for instance, a head of a patriarchal family or a director of an institution. The worth of fame places value on what is well known; the measure of worth is

recognition granted by the maximum number of people. Worthy persons are well-known personalities, stars, or opinion makers, for instance. Civic worth values the general interest of the community and is based on principles of equality, solidarity, and collective welfare. Praiseworthy relationships are those which involve or mobilize people for collective action, and worthy persons those individuals who are capable of overcoming their personal interests. Market worth values free-market relations, and the predominant common good is a by-product of the selfish maximization of profit. The important persons are buyers and sellers, who are worthy when being rich. Finally, industrial worth is about efficiency. The great persons are experts; they are worthy when being efficient and productive.

Predominance of these orders varies in different societies and cultures (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Therefore, these orders of worth provide a new approach for exploring forms of civil-society activism. These forms are culturally bound—and they might be complex and diverse in one cultural context (Koneva 2008). Particularly interesting are situations in which two or more worlds are compromised. Importantly, none of these six orders is superior to any another. If we interpret the conventional wisdom about Western and Russian civil societies in the light of Boltanski and Thévenot's framework, Western civil societies are sites of activities based on the civic worth of solidarities, equalities and collective interests and actions, while the stereotypical image of Russian civil-society organizations is based on the domestic worth of personal concerns and attachments (Alapuro 2010). However, my analysis based on the ethnographic data shows that the situation is more complex. I claim that, as one may expect, the logic of women's community organizing in Sortavala District relies mainly on the domestic worth; nevertheless, this logic is combined with the inspired worth. Furthermore, when seeing care not as apolitical but taking seriously its complex nature, I suggest that this activism also carries some elements of the civic worth (notably, some features imported by Finnish-Russian joint projects entail civic elements).

Who Are These Women? Female Community Organizers' Overlapping Roles and Intersectionality

In all of the studied settlements, voluntary activism among women is outstandingly apparent. Usually, a small group of women provides a diverse set of events and activities for their communities. These groups are led by an individual who has high authority among other active women and villagers. These active women are middle-aged, from their mid-thirties to sixties—the majority in their late thirties and forties. It is necessary to note that the predominance of active women cannot be explained by the absence of men (as a result of their low life expectancy at birth).¹³ Importantly, in rural Karelia, the percentage of male population is higher among the 35-39-year-old age group (52% of men vs. 48% of women) as well as the 40-44 (51% vs. 49%) and equal among the 45-49-year-old group (50% vs. 50%). After the age of 50, women start to predominate (51% vs. 49% among the 50-54-year-old group; and 55% vs. 45% among the 55-59).¹⁴ Due to the early age of retirement for women (50 years in Karelia), some of the active women are officially retired. However, in practice, owing to their low pensions, they continue to work after their retirement. The aging of active women is a well-recognized problem; active women attempt to attract younger activists. However, they face difficulties in activating the younger generation. Low participation of younger women is usually explained by the lack of time due to their domestic responsibilities. Additionally, I assume that these younger women would also lack the needed authority among their fellow villagers.

These female community organizers are well educated; many of them have a university or college degree—most often in education or culture. Thus, they represent professions that are in the core of *humanities intelligentsiia* (White 2004). More than one third of these women work as teachers or pedagogues in schools or day-care centers; one third in the cultural institutions, such as houses of culture, libraries, and museums (cf. Henry 2006). One fourth represent the so-called *technical intelligentsiia* (White 2004): they work as municipal civil servants (*munitsipal'nye sluzhashchie*) or in technical or economic departments of the state or private enterprises (cf. Kivinen 2006). Typically, these women already held influential positions during Soviet times, from which their present authority sometimes derives. Some of them even got their education in the academies of the Communist Party. Thus, these women represent a sort of mixture of *intelligentsiia* and Soviet *nomenklatura*.

As a rule, these women work in the so-called middle-class professions. However, they lack middle-class living standards and subsistence, particularly because of the low wages in the public sector, where they are employed (White 2004; Kivinen 2006).¹⁵ Thus, by their financial abilities they do not represent any elite, as their class position and professional identification would suggest. Some of these women are also involved in the Finnish-Russian transnational projects, but only a few of them benefit financially from these projects. It has been commonly argued that foreign funding for Russian civil society has created a new “NGO elite” (e.g. Hemment 2007; Henderson 2002; Richter 2002; Wedel 1998). However, payments and salaries in Finnish-funded projects seem to be modest in comparison with US-funded projects, for instance. Participants gain competencies and professional capital rather than money (see also Kulmala 2008a).¹⁶

As illustrated by Tamara, in the introductory story, these women have always been active. Most of them were active in the Soviet youth organization (*Komsomol*) or women's councils (*zhensovety*), for instance. Thus, there seems to be a clear continuation from the Soviet “voluntary” activism. Many of their skills and resources are rooted in these past activities (also Henry 2010). In contrast to some previous studies (e.g. Howard 2003), I see this Soviet experience as a resource, rather than a burden, for the current activism.

Community activism among these women accumulates: only a handful of women are active, but those very same women are involved in numerous positions. Their roles overlap: in addition of being active on a voluntary basis, they hold responsible positions at municipal institutions; some of them also serve as elected municipal councilors. Women from certain institutions who have high-ranking positions are targeted for membership in these women's groups, since those women have power and resources that facilitate their voluntary activities (cf. also Kulmala 2008b, forthcoming 2010b). The building of networks among the power-women refers to organizing relationships, as suggested in Stall and Stoecker's women-centered model of community organizing (see above). It is impossible to draw clear-cut boundaries between the public, i.e. state, and voluntary, i.e. civil-society, sectors in the work of these women; in attempts to solve local social problems, the combined efforts of these two sectors are a common practice. For example, teachers, pedagogues, and cultural workers, who are responsible for many activities due to their public-sector jobs, do not limit themselves to their working hours but rather continue these activities on a voluntary basis in their spare time. Thus, the boundaries of the voluntary and public sectors blur in the work of these women, which challenges the predominant liberal understanding of the state and civil society as separate from each other.

These women often claim to be exhausted, since they spend almost all their leisure time on these community activities. As a community organizer expressed: “Occasionally, we sleep.”

Among them, there is a high degree of personal commitment to the development and well-being of their communities. The head of administration of one settlement declared her readiness to keep the administration building open for 24 hours for community activities—if only villagers were willing to participate. She tries to break down the barrier between the administrators and ordinary citizens by spending time among the villagers. Breaking cultural and administrative barriers is usually seen as more characteristic for female leaders than male (Westman 2004).

Because the communities are small, these women know everyone and are well known and trusted among the villagers, who, in fact, constantly turn to them with their problems; for instance, it is easy to know that a community-activist librarian can be reached at the village library. This relationship with the villagers is often based on help and solicitude (cf. Zdravomyslova 2004). However, their work is supported and appreciated by the local dwellers. Thus, they have constituencies among their communities. This is in contrast to the many studies suggesting that Russian women's organizations are not engaged with the majority of ordinary women (e.g. Henderson 2002; Richter 2002; Zdravomyslova 2004).

Many of the active women are members of the district-level women's council (*sovet zhenshchin*), which has a subsection called "Village Women" (*zhenshchiny sela*). Most often, the leaders and/or other members of village-based women's groups also work in the women's council and coordinate the council's activities in their communities. This district-level organization participates in a Karelia-wide network of women's organizations, which can be considered a small-scale women's movement (Kulmala 2008b, forthcoming 2010b). The linkage between these levels is twofold: on the one hand, these village women report the concerns of their communities to the larger and more powerful network; on the other hand, upper-level agendas, programs, and projects reach these villages through the community organizers. Thus, they are a component of a larger social movement.

In addition to these women, a handful of men are active. These men are mainly involved in organizing activities for youngsters; for example, a male teacher running sport clubs after a school day, or a dad keeping an eye on the teenagers in the local disco. According to the active women, active men are rare examples and it is very difficult to motivate men to work in their local communities. These women also claim that, instead of a cup of tea, men need vodka at their gatherings.¹⁷ However, those men who are active have high authority among the youngsters and male villagers. Like active women, active men also often work in the public sector and serve as local councilors. Thus, interestingly, employment in the public sector seems to correlate with being active in the field of civil society. Active men also run some male clubs, such as hunting or fishing clubs—of which, in fact, I found surprisingly few.¹⁸ In the case of the men, however, activism differs from that of the women: while most women's groups work for their communities at large, not only for their female members, many male clubs function as hobby clubs and appear to be less community-oriented.

In conclusion: those women who are active in their communities share a similar identity based on their gender, age, and social class and position. In addition, the roles of women working on a voluntary basis and as civil servants overlap. In fact, a powerful position within the municipal structures is seen and used as a resource for their voluntary activities; thus the boundaries of the state and civil-society sectors blur. These sectors benefit from each other's resources. These women are also well connected with other Karelian women. This network, among other things, serves as a policy initiator at the level of the Karelian Republic (Kulmala, forthcoming 2010b). In this respect, community organizing is not of an apolitical nature, as is sometimes claimed.

Logics of Women's Community Organizing

According to Laurent Thévenot (2007), anyone who engages in collective activity has a commitment to some good. This commitment is an integral part of the logic and capacity of her action or engagement. I suggest that the common good of the women's collective endeavor is strongly connected to improving the well-being of these local communities and to a twofold understanding of citizenship rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, the logic of their activism relies on a combination of the elements from the domestic, civic, and inspired orders described by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), as I will show in the following sections.

Well-Being-Oriented Activities

The activities of these community organizers are targeted at improving the quality of life for various groups in their local communities. These women run a diverse set of activities for women themselves. For instance, handicraft classes are offered to allow women to make some extra money by selling their products; computer classes are taught to improve women's position in the labor market. In addition, different hobby clubs, such as choirs and ensembles, are formed. Women serve as Soldiers' Mothers by providing information for mothers and sons about the military service and help in case of difficulties.

In addition, these women organize activities for many other groups within their communities; attention is given to many vulnerable groups, such as young people, disadvantaged and young families, the disabled, and retirees. In this respect, their activism relies on the logic of the support of the weak by the strong, which according to Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) stands for the domestic order. For instance, these women run clubs for children and adolescents providing various leisure activities, help retirees with renovations of apartments, or obtain goods for the disabled or families with low incomes. In fact, often the cash-strapped local administrations turn to these women by asking for material support for their clients under the targeted social support (*adresnaia sotsial'naia pomoshch'*), which is one of the responsibilities of the municipalities. Within the framework of the town-based women's organization, these community organizers import specialists to their villages to meet and give consultations to women for issues like domestic violence or young parenthood. They also run support groups with the related topics. These services play an important role for the people in the villages with poor or nonexistent transportation to nearby towns where these services are located.

These women also take responsibility for the festivities in their villages. According to them and to other municipal officials, after the municipal reform, cultural events survive only because of the enthusiasm of these female organizers (cf. Donahoe, forthcoming). The reform made the lowest-level municipalities responsible for cultural activities, but due to the lack of resources, culture is not a top priority of their administrations. Also, these women take care of upkeep and cleaning of their villages, which should be done by the administrations. Thus, these women take various functions, from social support to infrastructural issues, which in theory would belong to the local administrations.

In Soviet times, professional people in small places felt responsibility for organizing and improving local community life and took on the so-called educational and information-transmitting roles (White 2004). These people were active in organizing of entertainment and local events—in other words, in “bringing culture to the masses” (White 2004; cf. Ristolainen

2008). Evidently, these functions are still there. At present, too, these women actively organize cultural and leisure activities for the villagers; nonetheless, I would suggest that actually the main function of these events is not so much in entertainment or culture but in resolving and preventing social problems, such as alcoholism and drug abuse. Idleness and associated drug abuse are said to stem from the municipalities' incapacity to provide leisure facilities (cf. White 2004). Thus, these different events are arranged to offer the villagers something to do other than hanging around and drinking (cf. Habeck et al., forthcoming).

The information-transmitting function is also present, seemingly related to many welfare-related questions. Because of their work in the public sector, these women have updated information on state social programs. They help the locals to access these forms of social support. At the other end of the spectrum, the responsibility of spreading information about community events—the birth of a child or upcoming festivities—also lies on their shoulders.

In the Russian context, social orientation of civil-society activism toward care becomes understandable in a historical context: during the Soviet period, under the state paternalism, care of Soviet citizens was an obligation sealed by a promise made by the state (Colin-Lebedev 2009; also Phillips 2008). In the current social situation, when the state, from the federal to the local level, fails to provide sufficient well-being for its citizens, many previous state responsibilities are carried out by mixing the state and non-state efforts. Even though the former contract is not valid anymore, Russian citizens still have expectations about the state. Importantly, at present, the central preoccupation of the Russian majority is on social rights rather than civil or political rights (Henry 2007). In this respect, the women's community organizing being examined, like any other socially oriented civil-society activities, articulates these citizens' expectations for care from the state, which fails to respond to these needs. These women articulate and defend the social rights of various groups vis-à-vis the state. Nevertheless, they do not openly confront the state (as assumed in the liberal state-society model). As suggested in the women-centered model of community organizing, these women aim at bridging gaps between the community's needs and its resources. Thus, the principles of collective welfare and general interests that Boltanski and Thévenot see as characteristic for the civic order are also present.

Many forms of the described activities were common during Soviet times. However, these women also have the potential to bring new and sensitive issues to the public—often in the framework of transnational projects. For instance, the previously silent issue of domestic violence is now widely acknowledged in these communities (cf. Kulmala, forthcoming 2010a). In this respect, activities that were at first seen as domestic in nature are linked also to the civic order.

Twofold Understanding of Citizenship

In addition to the improvement of the well-being of their communities, another common good that can be identified within the activities of these women is twofold—or even paradoxical. On the one hand, these women strive for a better quality of life, with a paternalist idea of the state being responsible for caring for its citizens. On the other hand, notwithstanding the idea of the state's paternalist role, these women are concerned about the passivity of the locals, who expect the administration to solve almost every one of their concerns. These women assume the responsibility of making fellow villagers participate in community activities in order to help their communities and to resolve their problems independently. In fact, many Finnish-funded projects emphasize activating the local population. Thus, in addition to the Soviet-type paternalist

citizenship, an idea of active citizenship is promoted and sought out. However, in practice these women do not find it very easy to make other people participate in community activities. All in all, these two different understandings of citizenship illustrate the contradictions of the domestic and civic orders of worth.

Essentialist Responsibility for Care Work

These women explain the feminine nature of their voluntary activism by invoking essentialist and biologically determined gender roles; women are seen *by nature* as being more active and more responsible for their communities on a voluntary basis in comparison to men. Therefore, the commitment to voluntarism is seen as a female responsibility, an obligation to help others, which refers to the domestic logic. Female specificity and difference from men is underlined; women are described as having certain characteristics, such as “kindness,” “benevolence,” and “responsibility,” characteristics that connect with motherhood and make women seem superior to men (Kulmala, forthcoming 2010b; cf. Rupp 1997; Webner 1999). These women see the mother as the basis of the family, which forms the basis for the society. The role of women as “saviors” of Russia is highlighted (cf. Salmenniemi 2008a). As one of the female leaders expressed when we witnessed a gathering of a village-based group of soldiers’ mothers: “Women rule this country.”

This women’s community organizing can be analytically tied to the concepts of social motherhood (e.g. Nätkin 1997; Salmenniemi 2008a) and community “other-mothering” (Staller and Stoecker 1998), i.e. to concepts that refer to women’s identity *as mothers* as a basis for their engagement in collective action. In other words, women mobilize as women and mothers in order to address a variety of needs and concerns, needs and concerns that reach out from personal into more public and general matters. The concept of social motherhood is often used in the framework of the maternal feminism, which has not been at the center of feminist studies and still remains controversial among feminist scholars (see e.g. Nätkin 1007; Webner 1999). However, maternal feminism seems to be a relevant category of feminism in the Russian context. Using these maternalist concepts, I want to put emphasis on women’s agency and political identity as mothers. As is often noted, this kind of community activism is not recognized as political because it occurs outside formal, male-dominated politics (Sperling et al. 2001). I consider this community organizing a form of civil-society activism, i.e., it is always political in some way. Furthermore, in Western countries, women’s maternalist voluntary activism has played an important role in building the welfare-state structures (e.g. Nätkin 1997; Saarinen 1994; Skocpol 1992; Webner 1999). Similarly, in these Karelian villages, the voluntarily active women are supplementing and complementing the official public structures as well as claiming the social rights of their fellow citizens against the state. In this respect, the domestic nature of this women’s activism also attains civic elements.

Emotional Aspects of Community Organizing

For these women and the beneficiaries of their work, a great deal of emotion goes along with their activism, and outbursts of feelings are common. First of all, despite feelings of tiredness, the energy and enthusiasm with which these women carry out activities are striking. These qualities relate to the inspired worth. As shown by Tamara in the lead-in story, enthusiasm keeps them going.

Their activities seem to be linked not merely to taking care of the vulnerable, but to belonging to a community. It is about socializing (*obshchenie*). As Alexei Yurchak (2006) described, the practice of *obshchenie* has deep roots in Soviet times, and it means more than just spending time in the company of others and talking with them. It also involves nonverbal interaction, as well as an intense and intimate commonality and intersubjectivity. These women often referred to *obshchenie* as one of the motivations to be active, and for their target groups to participate in the organized activities. Somehow, various clubs run by these women resemble the Soviet-type clubs (*kruzhki*), as many of them are still called (cf. Salmenniemi 2008b). These women articulate nostalgia about those Soviet-type clubs and voluntary organizations. Also, the male head of administration in one settlement expressed his gratitude to these women for upholding these community activities and socializing, which had “unfortunately almost disappeared since the collapse of the Soviet system.” According to him, these activities tighten the local communities together and promote feelings of community or collectiveness.

For the active women themselves, these women’s groups are also about sharing issues and experiences with their fellow women. Their meetings are full of laughter and joy. In addition to club meetings, they make trips and excursions together—just to take some time for themselves and to enjoy being together. But there is also crying—especially in the meetings and trainings within transnational projects, when they deal with many difficult issues. For instance, when I participated in training on domestic violence, the participants openly cried and shared their own experiences concerning violence. They also expressed gratefulness for helpful information and peer support. As one of them explained: “Information and training changed my whole life, including my attitude toward my own family relations.”

The emotional aspects of care are also significant for the beneficiaries of these women’s work. While observing encounters between these caregivers and care recipients, I noticed enormous gratitude on the part of the latter. I came across a great number of stories about tears of happiness: for instance, of a retiree seeing her apartment after it was renovated, of a parent of a disabled child after getting some material help, or of a child after Santa Claus had come for a visit and brought gifts. Also for the care recipients, club gatherings organized by these women are places of peer support, places to meet and socialize with people in a similar life situation. When I attended a club meeting for young families, participating young mothers were asked to share their feelings in the beginning of the meeting. Most of them told about feeling somehow miserable, but merely entering the room and seeing those other mothers made them feel better. On the occasions when these community organizers succeeded in motivating their fellow citizens for the community activities, these new members got positive feelings of being needed.

I claim that, apart from other presented factors, emotional aspects are very essential in order to understand the logic of the women’s community organizing. As Suvi Salmenniemi (2008b) observed, emotional capital—a sub-type of Bourdieuan social capital—promotes commitment to the group and, thus, upholds trust, solidarity, and a feeling of belonging to a community.

Conclusions

Certain middle-aged and well-educated women who possess certain positions seem to be almost everywhere and involved in almost everything. Intersections between gender, age, and class are evident. These women have a common identification deriving from their class position and womanhood. Their community activism is associated with maternal responsibility for the

weaker. These women are voluntary community leaders (*obshchestvennye lidery*) and “community other-mothers.” Thus, their voluntary activism can be conceptualized as social motherhood for the common good. These women mobilize as women and mothers to address a variety of needs and concerns. Furthermore, these village women are well connected to a larger Karelia-wide women’s movement (Kulmala 2008b, forthcoming 2010b). Thus, I consider this grassroots community organizing to be civil-society activism, and thus a political activity (cf. Sperling et. al 2001).

Those women who are most active for their communities usually work in the public sector. Women who hold a responsible position at municipal institutions are purposefully recruited into these women’s groups. Therefore, the very same women are active for their communities on a professional and voluntary basis. The work of these women thus transcends the boundaries between public and voluntary sectors, which reveals that the conceptual separation between the state and people does not make much sense. This challenges many previous studies on Russian civil society, which have tended to see civil society agents as co-opted by the Russian state. The predominant tendency of overlapping roles of the activists and civil servants within these Karelian municipalities right next to the Finnish border could be explained by the influence of the Nordic state-society model, within which similar overlap between the activists, administrators, and politicians is a common practice, and which is characterized by close collaboration between the state and civil society. Nevertheless, some other ongoing studies of the smaller municipalities in other parts of Russia seem to indicate a similar blurring of the state and non-state activities (Kay, forthcoming 2010; Sätre 2001), as do my shorter visits to the countryside in other parts of Russia. Thus, this might be a more general Russian tendency—at least in small-town and village settings (also Kulmala 2010).

The emergence of transnational projects in the region has brought new agendas and new forms of activities. Nevertheless, these women inherit from their Soviet past many forms and practices for their community organizing. The very same women were active already in Soviet organizations and from there derive much of their authority and organizational skills. These Soviet resources and practices are used and transformed in a new situation. This makes me wonder if we need to reevaluate the Soviet tradition of organizing: what was the importance of the Soviet organizations for the people who were active in them? Furthermore, to what extent, at least at the local level, was this Soviet type of organizing responding to the needs of local citizens (cf. Evans 2006)? To what extent were local solutions possible at that time—instead of the pervasive control of the Soviet state? All in all, in contrast to some previous studies (e.g. Howard 2003), I see this Soviet legacy as a resource rather than a burden for current activism and activities.

Undoubtedly, these women have an important role in their local communities. Everyday survival is the agenda of these women. They work for multiple groups of their communities. This socially oriented community organizing is explained through essentialist views about the responsibilities of women. Thus, its logic is primarily grounded in what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) call the domestic order. However, the picture is more complex. These women have the ability to bring new issues to the public and to articulate new identities of vulnerable groups and thus to promote social rights at large. Within their work, care is not just a personal concern; it points to more general, public claims. In this respect, the domestic nature of this community organizing combines—or “compromises,” in the words of Boltanski and Thévenot—with the civic elements. In addition, enthusiasm and other emotional aspects of activism are crucial to understanding the motivations of this feminine community organizing. Thus, as logics of action,

the domestic and civic orders discussed by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) are combined with the inspired one.

In sum, despite the huge social changes brought on by the collapse of socialism, many agents and structures have remained consistent. Perhaps one can witness more continuity than change from the Soviet times and practices. In any case, the space seems to be open for these women to take up issues to work with.

Notes

¹ I have constructed Tamara's story from the life stories of several active women within the studied villages.

² The administrative structure of the Russian Federation is organized at three separate levels: a central administration at the federal or state level, a regional administration at the level of the federal subjects, and a local administration in the municipalities. The municipal governance was reformed recently and the new law, (FZ-131) "On the General Principles of Organization of Local Self-governance in the Russian Federation," came into force January 1, 2006. One of the most concrete innovations of the recent reform was a creation of a two-level municipal system: 1) urban/rural settlements (*poselenie*) that are subordinated to 2) municipal districts (*munitspal'nyi raion*); and 3) town districts (*gorodskii okrug*), which are not in any hierarchical relationship with those two other types of municipalities. All of these municipal units have municipal governments and their own responsibilities, defined in the new law.

³ This paper relates to my ongoing sociological doctoral research, which examines the interaction between civil-society organizations (*obshchestvennye organizatsii*) and authorities at three different governmental levels in the Republic of Karelia. My ethnographic data includes more than 150 thematic and ethnographic interviews with multiple local actors, participant observation in numerous local, regional, and transnational events, and 300 pages of field notes. In addition, I have collected normative and other relevant documents.

⁴ As usually, also in this study, civil society is understood as an arena of activity outside the spheres of the private, the state, and the economic. However, following Gianpaolo Baiocchi et al. (2008), I treat civil society in relational terms rather than as a unitary or completely separate sphere from those other spheres. This relational approach calls for unpacking the sometimes contradictory relationships between the different spheres. These juxtapositions and understandings of civil society as a sphere "against the state" tend to characterize the liberal state-society model. Furthermore, my criteria for defining civil-society activities include the following principles: First, citizens' activities within this arena are based on voluntarism, not on any natural belonging to a certain group (e.g. family and kinship) or coerced participation by anyone; second, activities within this arena are self-governed and somehow organized (but not necessarily formally registered); third, actions within this arena take a collective form and are value-driven, i.e. participants have a certain mission. Fourth, these activities are carried out without striving for any commercial profit; thus, I define them as non-profit.

⁵ Russian small urban municipalities bear only little resemblance to Western understandings about towns and urban areas; as Anne White (2006) noted, "one is almost likely to meet a goat or

a cow on the streets rather than the high-rise apartment blocks that tend to characterize Russian cities.” In the Sortavala district, “urban” status was given to those settlements that are composed of only one village; whereas settlements composed of several villages obtained rural status.

⁶ The Russian names of the settlements are transliterations of the former Finnish names Helylä, Värtsilä, Haapalampi, and Kaalamo. In Karelia, these names were not changed or translated into Russian, as was done in the Leningrad Province, a part of which also belonged to Finland until World War II.

⁷ In Finland the situation is different: traditionally, fewer women have been in municipal councils than in the national parliament (Holli et al. 2007).

⁸ In the Sortavala district council, 8 out of 16 were women, while in the Sortavala town council 7 out of 14 members were women; respectively, in Khaapalampi 6 of 10, in Kheliulia 10 of 12, in Khaalamo 5 of 9, and in Viartsilia 8 of 11 settlement councilors were women.

⁹ The financial questions lie at the core of the recent reform of the local self-government, and many changes in organization of the financial basis of the municipalities took place. However, the new law has not solved the chronic lack of finances in most of the Russian municipalities (e.g. Gel'man 2007; Gel'man and Evans 2004; Kulmala and Tekoniemi 2007; Lankina 2005).

¹⁰ However, recently a few Anglo-American scholars (e.g. Cook and Vinogradova 2006; Johnson 2006; McIntosh-Sundstrom 2006; Thomson 2006) have illustrated more complex patterns when observing cooperative relations between the authorities and civil-society organizations.

¹¹ See footnote 4 for an explanation of how I understand the term *civil society*.

¹² I am aware of debates concerning this theory's applicability as logic of action vs. logic of justifying action (e.g. Dequech 2008). However, in this article I use the related terminology to conceptualize the logics of action as such, not only how the actors justify their actions.

¹³ In Karelia: 59.1 years for males and 65.5 years for females.

¹⁴ All in all in Karelia, women make up 54% of the population, which is equal to the number for the whole Russian Federation (Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki, 2008, <http://www.gks.ru/>).

¹⁵ In the public sector, the *average* salary of these women is about 3,000 rubles. Please note that the subsistence minimum for a working adult was around 3,500 rubles in May 2007 in the Sortavala district.

¹⁶ I have observed that the salaries of the local project coordinators vary from 50 to 150 euros per month in Finnish-Russian cooperative projects, which can be considered modest. However, it can be a worthwhile addition to the income of these women.

¹⁷ Cf. the crisis of masculinity in e.g. Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2003; see about criticism of these stereotypes in Kay 2006.

¹⁸ Besides some fishing or hunting clubs, in one settlement of this study, a registered group of young men, who search for the remnants of World War II in the neighborhood, is very active.

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