

Methods and Approaches in Research on the Changing Gender System in the North and Northwestern Regions of the Russian Federation¹

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the assessment of regional transformations of the gender system in the Russian Federation, particularly, in the northwestern part of the country. Operating with the notions of traditional and modern (in the process of modernization) gender contracts, the author analyzes the experience of the Nordic (Scandinavian) countries and speculates on its applicability in Russia, or at least in the northwestern part of the Russian Federation. She provides examples, describes methods and approaches applied in the studies of the gender system, and draws attention to her personal observations concerning the challenges of gender-programs implementation in the Russian Federation, relying on her long-standing research on the history of gender relations.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Gender System, Academic Androcentrism, Russia, Nordic Countries

The slow transformation of the gender system in the Russian Federation as a whole is an inarguable fact. The role of the northern and northwestern region in that transformation, and how to assess the transformations observed there is not yet clear. Only the existence and recognition of a certain ideal-type model that can be approached or deviated from makes any comparison and evaluation possible, and provides an opportunity to assess what one observes in practice (cf. Iarovaia 2006).

In the first section of the paper, I would like to argue that gender equality, or, to be more exact, some of its elements observed in Scandinavian/Nordic countries can be used as one of such ideal-type models. It was those countries—Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, and Finland—that in 2003 took the five top positions in the classification list of the countries with gender equality compiled by the international World Economic Forum.

It is not surprising that the state structure of Nordic countries, with their well-developed systems of social security, is aimed at supporting vulnerable members of the society. This system did not appear immediately but rather has been developed during several decades under the influence of different factors. The factors that facilitated the emergence of the system of women's social security and breaking of the traditional gender contract (characterized by pronounced polarization of gender roles, with the role of "breadwinner" and "defender" ascribed to the man and the child-rearing function performed mostly by the woman) included the following:

- Equal electoral rights acquired by women in the 1920s;
- Large-scale involvement of women in the labor market;
- Scientific and technological advances, which facilitated women's daily routines;

- Incorporation of women's rights into the system of human rights protection, which resulted from the second wave of the feminist movement, following World War II (cf. Tiainen 2007).

Among the above-mentioned factors, the last one is a factor that was lacking in the socio-political context of the former Soviet Union, where analysts (peacefully working within the Marxist paradigm, with its conviction that all problems will be resolved by transition to a new society) considered the "women's issue" mostly to be settled. In the Soviet Union, it was this conviction that prevented discussion of the issue of providing equality in terms of not only rights but also *opportunities* to women across the country in general, and in the north-northwestern region in particular, earlier in the 1960 and 1970s.

The Sample Model of Scandinavia

In the Nordic countries, the issue of special support to the family was raised following the war; the debates on special laws providing equal opportunities to both genders were conducted, for instance, in Norway and Sweden, as early as the late 1970s and early 1980s, and necessary acts were ratified and used as a basis for regulation of the issues concerning actual equality (cf. Yasmine 1996:530). In contrast, in the Soviet Union, until *perestroika*, the discussion on "certain shortcomings" was quite common, while positive assessment of presumably achieved gender parity predominated (both in the country as a whole and in the north and northwest of the Russian Federation).

The events of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s have changed not only the political map of the world but also the mentality of the majority of humanities specialists in our country. *Perestroika*, the dissolution of the Union, and the disintegration of the whole apparently solid system of socialism opened wide the doors of state archives and private collections of documents, challenged the results of previous social surveys and changed the mentality of social and political scientists and historians in a decade. Moreover, in the 1990s the government of Russia, under pressure from the public, realized the necessity of the settlement of "the women's issue": on 4 March 1993, the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation "On High-Priority Tasks of the Public Policy in Relation to Women"² was ratified; three years later, on 18 June 1996, ratification of the decree "On the National Action Plan for Improvement of the Status of Women and Increasing Their Role in the Society by the Year 2000"³ followed. Based on these and a number of other documents, regional programs aimed at improvement of women's social status started to be developed (e.g., Kudriashova 2000).

It is not surprising that centers for women's and gender studies emerged in the last decade of the 20th century. These centers were often organized under the influence and with the support of Western foundations in different regions and cities of Russia. They included those of them that emerged in the north and northwest of Russia, such as the Karelian Center of Gender Studies, established in Petrozavodsk in 1995 (directed by Larisa Dmitrievna Boichenko), and the Congress of the Women of the Kola Peninsula, established in Murmansk in 1998 (directed by Liubov' Vasil'evna Shtyleva). Research groups were set up to study women's history from ancient times to the present day, including one located in Syktyvkar, under the leadership of Andrei Al'bertovich Pavlov, and another one, in the Gender Studies Center at Pomor State University, Arkhangel'sk, under the leadership of E.V. Kudriashova.

New approaches in the studies of the social status of women and men in traditional and transitional societies in these centers and beyond, and numerous meetings and scientific conferences where participants could exchange opinions, made people consider Scandinavia as a sample model. It was there, in the Nordic countries, where many ideas of actual gender equality were realized; the policy found in these countries is notably called the policy of *state feminism*, as a number of principles of the feminist theory were implemented there on the public level. The originators of the laws supporting gender equality ratified in the end of the 20th century in the Nordic countries promoted several general methodological guidelines, such as:

1. Demolition of gender stereotypes should entail not only free choice of occupation and having a right to obtain any professional training (in a number of cases it can lead only to introduction of women into “male” occupations, as was the case in the Soviet Union in the 1930s), but also growing social status and higher salaries paid at primarily female jobs (Van der Ros 1997, 2000:209).
2. Erosion of the traditional (patriarchal) gender contract suggests not only a growing level of professional occupation and personal fulfillment of women but also increased participation of men in family life (in terms of taking care of both household chores and family members).
3. Gender equality in the country’s domestic affairs has a moderating influence on its foreign policy: the country becomes less aggressive (Caprioli 2000:51). Therefore, attention paid to gender problems at the legislative level and gender assessment of every law provide new visions of the general picture of labor and employment, demography, and family and cultural development and also demonstrate the widest perspectives in the spheres of internal and foreign policies.

“State feminism” in the Nordic countries, primarily in Norway and Sweden, was accompanied and characterized by growing female representation in the top echelons of legislative power, by reaching practically equal representation of women and men in parliaments (“fifty fifty” was a slogan of the last quarter of the 20th century), in governments, and in municipalities, as well as by designing special state programs aimed at equality of family and professional commitment of men and women (Il’ina 2001). It is no surprise that the strategy of “gender mainstreaming” or integration of true equality and equal opportunities in all spheres of the society, became an important part of EU activities after its founding, and an integral part of EU policy since 2001. A number of major achievements of true equality can be enumerated as results of implementation of “gender mainstreaming” policy. I will provide some of them below:

- Adequate representation of women at the decision-making level: in Sweden, women constitute 40 percent of the parliament, in Finland 33.5 percent, in Denmark 33 percent, and only in Norway are there relatively few women: 9.4 percent on the legislative level (Isaev et al. 2000:48). Note that in the Russian Federation there are so few women on the decision-making level that Russia took the 120th place in the list.
- Availability of committees on family policy in the government (in Northern European countries since the mid-1960s).
- The children-centered family model as an attainable ideal (Hiilamo 2002:9-22), “new fatherhood” or “responsible fatherhood” as a part of family policy and a normative model.

- Parity or joint custody (documented) in the case of divorce. In Northern European countries, children stay with fathers in 30 to 40 percent of cases, and in the Russian Federation only in one percent of cases (cf. Hobson and Morgan 2002:2; Gurko 2006:221).
- “Support of two breadwinners” as a principle of family support (Korki 1999) instead of encouraging the traditional model in which the man, a breadwinner and a defender, ought to fully provide the family well-being, including the wife’s well-being, and the woman, as a rule, stays home managing the household and bringing up children); prospective recognition of domestic work and care as equal to professional fulfillment.
- All children, regardless, of their parents’ incomes, receive aid until they are 18 or graduate from a secondary school (a working mother receives less, and one who quit her job receives more). In Sweden, the situation is unique: a mother receives 100 percent salary during a year. In other countries the aid constitutes: 370 euros per month in Norway, 270 euros in Finland (until the child is three years old), and 230 euros in Denmark (Morgan and Zippel 2003:54-55).
- Families with three or more children receive additional aid and additional days of paid leave (Kamerman and Kahn 1987).
- Paid maternity leave (in some countries it constitutes 450 days) is *divided* by the parents according to their choice, with one month reserved for the father. The obligatory paternity leave for fathers enables the woman to maintain her professional skills and the man to maintain his connection with the child. In Iceland, almost all prospective fathers have an 80 percent paid leave from their jobs for three months. The new law was enforced in 2002. In Sweden, maternity leaves up to one and a half years are complemented by additional days off allowed for adolescents’ parents and by two paid obligatory days a year for “school attendance” (Sorokina 1999).
- A well-developed system of childcare services—for example, rooms for parents with children provided in all institutions, even in the building of the state parliament. In Sweden, a considerable part of childcare services, up to 40 percent, consists of private businesses. In Finland, where this system of private service is underdeveloped, the state pays a special bonus to mothers with children under four as a reimbursement of nannies’ services (Singh 1998:100);
- A well-developed system of state support for surrogate mothers since the end of the 1980s (Malin and Burrell 2004:73-93), which made Finland a country of reproductive tourism (people come here to conclude an agreement on surrogate motherhood because the donor’s anonymity is not required, as in other Northern European countries). It is interesting to note that female relatives (sisters, daughters, etc.), as well as close friends of the applicant, often agree to become child bearers.⁴
- Care provided to family members (children and old people) defined by the term “service work” entitles women to a pension (Van der Ros 1997, 2000:212).

“No Need for Orders from Abroad”: The Situation in Russia

The Nordic countries that have formed the intergovernmental Arctic Council are implementing a concerted family policy. Formally, Russia has also entered the council, but in practice, the government of the Russian Federation tries to rephrase a number of decisions discussed at the council, since such legislative acts are effective not only in the north-northwest

region but across the whole territory of the Russian Federation. The introduction of maternity leaves in Russia entailed establishment of a ceiling for the benefits paid: women in the Russian Federation can stay home with children for one and a half years and receive aid that, as a rule, turns out to be considerably less than the salary received prior to childbirth. (One exception is when a young mother is a student or a housewife without working experience.) The same problem is faced by Nordic countries: the aid is less than the salary, whereas a leave from work during the most productive years can negatively affect subsequent professional growth. It is not surprising that such gender shifts result in more parents deciding to have their first baby at a later age (up to age 30 to 32, which is called “delayed parenthood”; cf. Gurko 2008:327) and, as a consequence, in families with few children.

In the Nordic countries, an increasing age of primiparas (in contrast, for instance, to Portugal, where it remains 24; cf. Billari 2006:69) as well as the rapidly growing number of illegitimate children—reaching 64 percent in Iceland, 56 percent in Sweden, and 50 percent in Norway—are considered normal. In Russia, the number of families with few children and the age of primiparas are also growing, although not so rapidly: the age of primiparas was 22.6 in 2003. As for cases of illegitimate childbirth, they constituted approximately 30 percent before 2003, having increased by 20 percent since 1980. All this has resulted from a delayed arrival of the sexual revolution in Russia, when new kind of contraceptives that turned out to be too expensive for many were thrown out to the pharmaceutical market, while the debates on and introduction of various topics connected with sex appeal in the mass media intensified (Chernova 2008:248). Moreover, speaking about the north and northwest Russian Federation, demographers note a high level of professional employment among women, which, according to them, has been maintaining “since the Soviet times and constituting around 67 percent, with the index being impacted by a younger structure of the population” (Zubarevich 2004:234).

Another difference between the Russian Federation and Scandinavian countries is a lack of freedom for women to choose a prospective occupation. The issue of having a job is not a matter of free choice for mothers in Russia: in the Soviet Union, labor was a duty, while in the present-day Russian Federation it is a requirement in order to provide the family’s material well-being. There is a direct correlation with the level of education: women with a high level of education feel inequality in career development twice as often as women with incomplete higher or secondary education (75 percent vs. 43 percent; cf. Roshchin 1996:43); the level of their complaints is twice as high. As for the north-northwest region, it is characterized by high employment among women and a medium level of gender-based disproportions in salary (Zubarevich 2004:237-238).

The third difference is preservation of the traditional gender contract—traditional family gender roles translated by the mass media as the ideal to be followed and the gender stereotypes reproduced by the mass media in Russia (Boichenko 2006). Attempts to introduce separate instruction for girls and boys in order to teach girls in girls’ school to be good mothers and wives are, indeed, an unpleasant “gender surprise.” In this context, the continued resistance of male officials to the establishment of any centers uniting women and strengthening women’s activities beyond the domestic sphere appear to be natural in the region under consideration.

When we just started implementing the idea of establishing a gender-studies center in 1997, we faced a lot of people, mostly men, whose attitude to the project was negative. We were told that it’s none of our women’s business to establish such an organization. Male managers were afraid of women’s activities and their

outcomes. They justified their point of view with Russian national peculiarities (*rossiiskie natsional'nyimi osobennostiami*): "There is no place for Russian women in the government." They were concerned with any proactive position taken by women... (Kalinina 1999:95).

Fourth, the professional mobilization of women suits the interests of the state, which is always in favor of a woman being not just a mother but a *working* mother. Thus, all kinds of slogans of the Soviet era ("Women, jump in the tractor! Women, let's become shock workers!") were most suitable for mobilizing women's labor potential rather than for meeting women's expectations and interests. Even nowadays, Russian women, in practice, cannot choose between a well-paid job and motherhood: the maternity aid is miserable and covers only unqualified workers' salaries. There are no women occupying high posts: women reach such status only toward the end of their reproductive age, when it is late to bear a child. This conclusion is true for many women and many professional spheres, including the academic sphere (surveys and in-depth interviews with female scientific workers of different generations confirm this hypothesis; cf. Pushkareva, in press).

One more difference between women in Russia and women in other European countries concerns divorces. Formally, women in Russia are granted the right to break family relations at will, and, in practice, many women initiate divorces. However, in the context of lacking housing, a divorce initiated by a woman will most likely lead to a sharp decline in living standards and in greater dependence of women on families and kin networks in order to survive (Chernova 2008:188; see also Hobson 1990:114).

Finally, it is no surprise that the general trend of ideological comments translated by the mass media can be described as neo-traditionalist. Such a trend, in the end, leads to the perpetuation of the family model, with the man as a breadwinner and the woman as a housewife presented as a "time-proven" normative model.

Reasons for the Prolongation of Negative Trends in Russia

What is the reason for the emergence and continued existence of this distinctive situation in Russia? It is not the central administration but rather *local authorities* that are made responsible for implementation of virtually all programs of support to women and family policy as well as for changes (leading to increased importance) of the man's role within the family in the group of the Nordic countries under consideration. On the local level, many ideas and innovations can go through the necessary approval even after initial rejection and resistance. Redistribution of funds in favor of those regions with a negative fertility rate, few children in families, and women not following the advice to quit the job, but willing to achieve professional fulfillment beyond home and the family, allows for attempts of the introduction of new initiatives. The tools for alleviation of gender polarization tested in Scandinavia and elsewhere (e.g., Canada) are very likely to become suitable for Russian conditions. I will draw attention to the fact that municipal and regional governmental levels are less desirable for men and, therefore, less competitive and more easily attainable for women (Trimble 1995; Vickers 1978).

So far, most initiatives in the various regions of the Russian Federation have been initiated and controlled by the center. When programs are initiated at the local level,⁵ they do not work for a very mundane reason—because of the lack of funds. And the presence of women's public organizations does not provide a solution, either.⁶ (One such organization was established

in Archangel'skaia Province back in the Soviet period; since 1973 it has become the Archangel'sk Branch of the Union of the Women of Russia, presided over by Tamara Rumiantseva.)

A low level of awareness and education concerning gender equality among the urban and especially the rural population challenges us with the task of not mere collection of information, as prescribed to us as historians and ethnographers, but rather with the translation of our knowledge to public organizations' activists, party members, social workers, deputies, and representatives of local and regional administrations, let alone students and young teachers. The first conferences funded by foreign colleagues in 1997-2000 were aimed at this task (cf. Kalinina 1999). But even now, the organization of seminars and training still directly depends on the neighbor countries' financial support: the situation has not changed during these several years (cf. Larina 2005; Anon. 2006). For instance, one of the recent seminars of the school of women's leadership (Northern Legal Information Portal) on the topic "Gender Aspects of Regional Policy" was conducted in Murmansk in 2007 with the financial support of the Norwegian People's Aid (Mikhailova 2007). Consideration of gender issues in future development strategies for the northern and northwestern territories and monitoring gender aspects of drafted and implemented programs and social projects are the means to avoid social, particularly, demographic downturns.

Overcoming Academic Androcentrism: The Role of the Present-Day Ethnography and Folklore Studies

In the penultimate part of my paper I will come down from generalities (economic and educational factors) to particulars, from general methods (comparative historical, system, holistic, and others) to particular approaches—to studying the changes of the gender system in the north-northwest region of Russia. I will discuss the issue of relevance and applicability of general principles and approaches of the feminist ethnology for present-day ethnologists gathering materials on the topic of the "gender shift," or, rather, the contemporary gender revolution (by which I mean weakened polarization of traditional gender roles) in the region under consideration.

First of all, I will stress that the main typical features of the women's and gender history of the region are not sufficiently reflected in the present-day academic and popular-science press. E.V. Kudriashova, the founder of the Center for Women's and Gender Studies, Pomor State University, remarked in one of her papers that

The issues of socio-political activity of women on the regional level are determined by historical, cultural, and economic peculiarities of each region. The features that have traditionally characterized the Pomor Region included: (1) A high level of literacy among women's population. In the end of the 19th century, 59 percent of northern women were literate (Boichenko 1995:18)—this exceeded numbers registered in Moscow and St. Petersburg at that time). (2) A certain degree of independence on the labor market. More than 3,500 Pomor women were engaged in different economic activities (17 percent of all sea hunting business was controlled by women, while 45 women were helmswomen and shipmistresses). (3) Active participation of women in public life. Charitable and educational activities of the nuns of Surskii Monastery of St. John of Kronstadt

and the members of Archangel'sk "Women's Guardianship Society," established in 1857, were well-known across the whole of Russia. Pomor women were considered to be strong, independent, and freedom-loving. Historical memory determines values, demands, and social and political expectations of present-day women... (Kudriashova 2000)

I will add to the above-mentioned that folklorists note that fairytales, sayings, and beliefs connected with female sorcery (love spells, searching for lost people and cattle, healing), as well as witchery practiced by sorceresses and female healers are especially widespread phenomena typical for the region (Vlasova 2001).

I would argue that in this context, large-scale involvement in the sociopolitical sphere demonstrated by present-day women in the northwest is not surprising (see the paper by Meri Kulmala on this thematic issue). Whereas women were underrepresented (constituting less than 8 percent) in the third session of the State Duma, there were many more women represented on the regional level in the north and northwest of the Russian Federation: women made up 13 percent of the provincial assembly and 39 percent in city and district assemblies (Kudriashova and Kukarenko 2003:91)—these figures are much higher than in Russia as a whole. In other words, in the past as well as in the present, the women of the north and northwest of Russia have been socially and politically active. We should aim at making them realize this fact.

I think that overcoming of androcentrism in academic studies of this and many other issues suggests:

1. Dismissal of "mixed" male and female narratives; individual approach to each one of them;
2. Special attention paid to attempts to understand women's social experience from the subjective point of view and their life perspective;
3. Ability to listen to internal emotional reactions, to compare one's own life experience with the informant's life experience (the problem of "relying" on one's emotions instead of eliminating them);
4. Special consideration of case studies aimed at conscious subjectivization of the object of studies regardless of their uniqueness;
5. An interactive and even argument-provoking approach to collecting information rather than just a formal, affirmative description;
6. Optimistic perspectives, improved self-esteem of both female informants and researchers, and overcoming of the tradition of women's victimization;
7. Non-authoritarian nature of conclusions, or departure from the male research standards primarily aimed at persuasion.

Conclusion

Concluding my reflections on the topic of the methods and approaches to studying changes of the gender system in the north-northwest region of the Russian Federation, I once again would like to stress that analysts' theoretical assumptions predetermine all assessments provided in their works. While initiating any research project, they may find themselves biased by prefabricated concepts and the theoretical background as an integral part of the personality of every individual researcher, as well as by their socialization, education, and professional

experience. Perspectives on collection of materials shared by historians and folklorists with a traditional academic background may lead to establishment and strengthening of various ethnic and gender stereotypes (Shabaev 2007). A participant of the workshop “Gender and Models of Creative Behavior of Male and Female Writers of the European North in the 1980s and 1990s,” held in June 2004 in Martsial’nye Vody, located in the vicinity of Petrozavodsk, made an interesting remark: “Whereas earlier men acted as innovators and women were keepers of the tradition, now men have become bearers of traditional values and women create new moral imperatives” (Krasavtseva 2004). It truly appears to be so: rewriting women’s history of the region became one of the new moral imperatives. Overcoming stereotypes, paying attention not so much to the complementarity of gender roles (with women taking the second position) but rather to their interchangeability, and aiming at truly equal opportunities for men and women in the world today are moral imperatives of today’s ethnologists, regardless of their gender.

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Notes

¹ Translated by Olga Povoroznyuk.

² In the original, “*O pervoocherednykh zadachakh gosudarstvennoi politiki v otnoshenii zhenshchin*” (translator’s note).

³ In the original, “*O natsional’nom plane deistvii po uluchsheniui polozheniia zhenshchin i povysheniui ikh roli v obshchestve do 2000 goda*” (translator’s note).

⁴ In the countries oriented toward the traditional gender contract, such practice would be considered an expression of tolerance in relation to same-sex partnerships. From the point of view of many Catholic leaders, partners of same-sex alliances should not be granted a right to continued reproduction, let alone the right to choose a child’s gender and to provide for childbirth outside of “normal” family relations. (With children in same-sex marriages who are born by surrogate mothers, these options may become more likely in the future.)

⁵ Decree of the Governor of Archangel’skaia Province “On the Regional Action Plan for Improving Women’s Status and Increasing Their Role in the Society up to the Year 2000,” ratified in 1997.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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