Soviet Women in the Urban Work Force

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Women have played a complex and demanding role as workers within the Soviet economic system during the twentieth century rise of the USSR. Their participation in the labor force at least since the Bolshevik Revolution has been widespread and essential. Without them, the rapid industrialization of the country would not have been possible. And yet their role has been and is anomalous. Henry Roberts comments on the contradictory dualism in the role of women in Russia, noting that the common view of Russia emphasizes its ruggedly male side, with women simply not visible in positions of power. At the same time, he indicates, women are recognized as occupying a disproportionately large place in the labor force, contributing heavily in the areas of manual labor as well as (more recently) playing important roles in such professions as engineering and medicine (Roberts 3).

Government commentaries throughout the Stalinist era gave optimistic appraisals of the success of socialism in securing sexual equality for women. But the inconsistencies and inequalities involved in their role became more evident as the decades passed. “Beginning in the mid-60’s ... in specialized publications designed for internal audiences, ritual self-congratulations began to give way to serious discussion of ‘shortcomings’ and ultimately of ‘contradictions’ in Soviet everyday life (Lapidus xi). Conditions afflicting women in their work life became one subject of discussion at official levels.

There will be no attempt in this paper to discuss the crucial contributions of that large segment of Soviet women (around 80% in the 1920’s, still around 30% in the 1980’s) whose work in agriculture has placed upon them demands harsher than those upon perhaps any other group of Soviet workers. This paper will instead focus on the nearly two-thirds of Soviet women whose working careers presently center in urban areas. It will examine key conditions attending the rapid influx of Soviet women into the urban work force, from unskilled industrial workers to highly professional scientific workers, engineers, and doctors.

World War I occasioned the first mass movement of women into the labor force in Russia. Large numbers of men went off to the army and also to the cities to provide industrial labor. Women were left to work the farms (Dunn 169). For thirty years following the Revolution, the decimation caused by internal and international conflicts reduced the Soviet population (mostly male) annually by 2.8 million. As a result, Russia (RSFSR), which in 1910 had a population equal to the United States, had in 1970 only 130 million citizens as compared with 205 million in the United States (Sacks 189-190). The need for women to enter the labor force in large numbers, particularly in urban areas, was crucial.
Ideologically, also, it was important to move women out of the home. As Lenin pointed out, the danger of leaving women in the home was too great:

The backwardness of women, their lack of understanding for the revolutionary ideals of the man, decrease his joy and determination in fighting. They are little worms which, unseen, slowly but surely rot and corrode (Lapidus 74).

Stalin added, “The healthy soul of our youth and the advancement of our country depends on whether the mother sympathizes with Soviet order or trails along behind the priest, kulak, and bourgeois” (Lapidus 76).

The Marxist analysis assumed that as the industrialization of the economy expanded and as the socialization of the country proceeded according to plan, the socialization of many household jobs would be a part of this larger process. This expectation did not, however, materialize. Industrial needs and economic pressures in general crowded out of the picture the envisioned large scale transfer of household chores into the public sector (Lapidus 108-109).

The burden of housework, as a result, remained with the family, the wife assuming the larger portion and thereby finding herself increasingly burdened by her dual role at home and at work. Family legislation enacted in the mid-30’s reversed the earlier orientation of the state toward the family. Previously it had been theorized that the family would “wither away” as child care centers and state-provided home services removed the function of the home. The new theory, however, considered the family to be the heart of the new social system. The family was seen as the central social institution, performing critical functions and supplying essential services. For one, the family was to serve as a highly visible model of enduring social order, thereby making marital permanence and family stability a crucial element in the new society (Lapidus 112). And with the family elevated in this manner, housework was to be regarded with new dignity and importance, becoming now “socially useful labor” (Lapidus 114). An effect of this revised view was the institutionalizing of household labor and, consequently, of the dual burden upon married Soviet women.

The expansion of educational and occupational training for women was recognized as essential from the beginning if women were to be assimilated successfully throughout the labor force and into the new social order. Without broader understanding and newly developed skills, women would remain at the lowest occupational levels, their potential for contribution underdeveloped and wasted. The objective of Soviet planning

in regard to education, therefore, focused on transforming a system which had been sexually segregated into one in which girls and boys would share educational opportunity, which would train both sexes jointly for the social and economic needs of Soviet society (Lapidus 137).

Implementing a new and expanded system was, of course, slow and difficult. In December, 1927, the school census for the entire Soviet Union revealed only 8.5 million primary students, less than 2 million students in the seven-year schools, and less than 1 million in the nine-year schools. Female enrollment was 37%, 44% and 50%, respectively, at these educational levels (Lapidus 139). Rapid expansion of enrollments began in the 1930’s and continued through the 1950’s. For example, in 1926 less than 10% of Soviet children had access to junior secondary school (grades 5 through 7). By 1939, 65% were attending; and by 1958, 97%. Also in 1926, only 1.3% attended senior secondary school (grades 8 through 10). By 1958, the proportion had risen to 33% (Lapidus 140). Female participation at the senior secondary level is impressive, with girls accounting for 56% of the enrollment, 58% in urban areas. It must be noted, though, that this high percentage reflects not only the academic success of girls within the system, but also the greater tendency of boys to enroll in technical and vocational training that prepared them for skilled jobs. The more generalized education received by the girls led more often to enrollment in institutions of higher education (Lapidus 143).

Under the Soviets, opportunities for women have expanded enormously in higher education also. From 1927 to 1937, women increased their portion of the total enrollment in institutions of higher education from 28% to 43% (Lapidus 148). After reaching unnaturally high proportions (77%) during the war years, the percentage of women declined to a more representative 52% in 1955. Government policies (i.e., quotas, etc.) during the Khrushchev era were apparently designed to further reduce that percentage—down to 42% in 1962. After Khrushchev’s removal and a revamping of educational policy, the enrollment of women moved back to 49-51% in the early- to mid-1970’s (Lapidus 150).

All in all, opportunities for Soviet women have been extended significantly throughout the educational system, and Soviet women have responded to the invitation massively.

This is not to say, however, that conditions of sexual equality prevail in the Soviet educational and vocational training systems. In a number of ways beyond what has been already mentioned, patterns of sexual differentiation and inequality have been built into the training systems and, as a consequence, into the labor force and the economy as well. Division of occupational paths by sex begins, as suggested earlier, by predominantly male choice into specialized technical and vocational schools. Some evidence indicates that sex stereotyping takes place, beginning early in Soviet schools and leading to distinct patterns of preference by sex (Lapidus 143). Soviet occupational stereotyping is apparently quite similar to Western patterns so that, with exceptions, Soviet women tend to segregate into certain of the same occupations as do women in the
West. Health, education, and cultural fields, for example, attract large numbers of Soviet girls (Lapidus 145). An important departure from conventional stereotyping is the portrayal of girls as interested in math and science, a modification which apparently has drawn many Soviet girls to an interest in areas of engineering and medicine.

The commitment of Soviet planners to see women in schools and in the working force in large numbers is not apparently matched by a commitment to give them the training to establish them in positions of authority or power. One case in point is graduate school, where in 1931 women made up 23% of enrollment. In 1960, the percentage was exactly the same: 23% (Lapidus 155). The proportion of women holding higher degrees in science shows some—but relatively slight—movement upward over time. From 1950 to 1975 the proportion of female science workers with the scholarly degree of Candidate of Science rose from 25.0% to 28.7%. Over the same period the proportion of female science workers with the scholarly degree of Doctor of Science grew from 7.2% to 14.0% (Lapidus 156). Jancar likewise detects some apparent regime bias in favor of men at the level of higher education:

*Izvestia* has claimed that since 1939 the number of women with a higher education per 1,000 female population has increased seven times (from 5 to 35), as against an increase of four times (11 to 48) for men. Given the initial female educational lag plus the war years and war deaths, one wonders why the increase has not been more and why still proportionately more men are better educated (Jancar 23).

Here and (as will be seen) elsewhere, state planners appear more ready to encourage and accept participation by women than to encourage training for leadership for women.

The constraints imposed by sexual stereotyping in early education are not the only factors influencing entry into technical and vocational training schools and ultimately into specialized sectors of the Soviet working force. *Women, Work, and Family in the Soviet Union*, a collection of essays by Russian economic analysts, gives further insight into matters deemed pertinent. Physiological differences between the “male organism” and the “female organism” apparently weigh heavily on the consciousness of Soviet economic planners. M. Ia. Sonin, for example, makes clear that the working stations women use at existing enterprises “are as a rule less comfortable than men’s since they were initially designed for the male organism” (Sonin 30). V. G. Kostakov points out that “undoubtedly there are trades that most fully suit the psychophysiological needs of the female organism” (Kostakov 54) and that “an important prerequisite for the occupational specialization of women is due consideration for the specific features of the female organism” (Kostakov 60). These references and others like them help to explain why “Each of the 1100 occupations for which training is offered at Soviet technical-vocational institutions is explicitly designed for males, females, or both sexes, and only 714 are accessible to women” (Kotliar and Turchaninova 92).
Exclusion from a sizable number of technical schools may well be a serious barrier for women. Vocational training is received either in a technical school or through an apprenticeship involving on-the-job training. The vocational-technical training school is apparently perceived by all as providing more effective training. Relatively few women manage to achieve skill ratings which place them in the higher skill levels (levels five and six), and surveys conducted at a number of factories confirmed that the great majority of women who achieved these high ratings were graduates of vocational-technical schools (Kotliar 92). Furthermore, at various factories within the Russian Republic, surveys indicated that the dominant means of training workers was through the apprenticeship method. A further finding was that, in the factories surveyed, a substantially higher proportion of women than men received their training through the on-the-floor apprenticeship method (Kotliar 95). Women also perceive more negatively their chance at professional advancement.

We see that some 70% of the male workers currently studying see opportunities for professional and occupational advancement at their factory, whereas only half the women workers share such expectations. Moreover, only 40 out of every 100 women attending advanced training courses think it will help them win promotion (Kotliar 99).

Skill level assessment of men and women workers is also instructive. Women make up 70%-80% of those workers whose skills are evaluated as falling within the two lowest levels, levels one and two. At the high end of the skill rankings, levels five and six and higher, women account for only 5%-35% of this group (Shiskan 122). Education and training of the sexes appear to explain these percentages. The general education received by most females is regarded as facilitating a “more rapid mastery of specialized knowledge and work habits and attitudes, and in this sense it is the foundation on which work skills form and develop” (Kotliar 91). But without careful technical training as a follow-up, many Soviet working women apparently find themselves at a distinct disadvantage in the marketplace.

Physiological differences between men and women do not prevent the “female organism” from being assigned jobs involving heavy manual labor. A woman working at a train station in a mail transport department describes her job:

By law, women are not supposed to lift weights over twenty kilograms (forty-four pounds). But if the weight of the package does not exceed this weight, it is assumed that a woman can lift this same weight over and over again, countless numbers of times. Here in our office, the norm or quota is three hundred packages per person per day (during a holiday season the quota is as high as five hundred per day). Each package weighs from seven to ten kilograms. Thus, all together, a woman must lift more than two thousand
kilograms (forty-four hundred pounds) in one shift and during "holidays" four to five tons... What is surprising is that only women work this unbelievably labor-intensive job (Dobrokhotova 5-6).

Postal workers, including letter carriers, were 80.5% women in 1959, 89.88% in 1970 (Sacks 202).

A somewhat brighter picture emerges, however, in white collar categories in industry. Engineering in particular has attracted large numbers over the years, increasing the ranks of female engineers from 44,000 in 1941 to over one million in 1970 (Lapidus 182). In the mid-1970's, women accounted for 35% of design and product engineers and over 45% of process engineers (Shiskan 121). Lapidus points out that this surge of women into engineering may be to increase the number of women in positions of authority in industry since an engineering background is almost required by the Soviets as a prerequisite for leadership in industry. Women enterprise directors increased during these years, for example, from 1% of the total in 1956 to 6% in 1963 to 13% in 1970 (Lapidus 183)—not yet a percentage proportional to female participation, but a long step forward, nonetheless.

Progress for women in semiprofessional and professional areas generally has been dramatic for some time. Between 1959 and 1970, nearly five million additional women joined the semiprofessional and professional ranks (Sacks 199). From 1928 to 1974 their representation within these fields grew from 29% to 59% (Dodge 206). Technicians and statisticians, planners and commodity specialists experienced more than three-fold growth in less than fifteen years (1955-1968). Engineers and economists enjoyed growth nearly as great. Teachers and medical personnel (including dentists) more than doubled. According to 1970 census figures, besides being completely dominant (over 90%) in certain traditionally female areas—as nurses, secretaries, heads of libraries, typists—women largely dominated (with 70-90% workers) in the following areas: teachers, bookkeepers, laboratory workers, economists and planners, communications workers, physicians, midwives, and data processors. Women also held a high proportion of the positions as inspectors (68%), dentists (77%), chief physicians (52%), designers and draftsmen (57%), and heads of scientific research institutes and organizations (scientific personnel 40%) (Dodge 207-208).

The optimism of numbers such as these is tempered by the fact that even in the fields dominated largely by women—medicine, for example—the more desirable locations and the top administrative positions tend to be held by men receiving significantly larger salaries. Rural medical positions, for example, are almost exclusively filled by women. Women are also concentrated (90%) within the area of pediatrics, whereas they make up only 6% of registered surgeons (Lapidus 188). In addition, semiprofessional and professional positions generally require the dedicated worker to return to school regularly, to continue to learn. The burden of children and home may press particularly heavily upon women of ability in the professional and semiprofessional ranks.

Socialist promises to women, that is to say, have been kept—in part. Doors have been
opened wider in education, in industry, in the professions. But equality has not become a reality. And the burden of dual responsibility still rests heavily upon the woman. A woman’s weekly work load in 1967-70 was still 14 hours heavier than her husband’s (Moskoff 6-7). As a matter of fact, as Moskoff points out, a woman’s weekly load in 1967-70 was still 6 hours heavier than a man’s load in 1923-24.

What seems clearest in all these statistics and testimonials is that the prospects of women appear to improve when such advances suit the purposes of the state. The commitment of Soviet planners to the welfare of women apparently extends to the point where such welfare parallels or coincides with the direction set for the Soviet state at large. When goals relating to the equality or advancement of women conflict with some other state-determined goals, the goals related to women are the ones to be sacrificed. The foundations of women’s rights in the Soviet Union are, in other words, apparently built on shifting sands.

Gorbachev’s recently announced aim to increase the Soviet economy 4.7% annually till the end of the century (Insight 29) places a new burden upon Soviet workers. This very ambitious goal comes at a time when two unhappy factors converge. First, the supply of non-working women which, for over a half century, Soviet planners have drawn more and more fully out of homes and into the market place, has now been virtually exhausted. Secondly, demographic projections suggest that 1985 to 2000 is a no-growth period for the Soviet labor market. Taken together, this all means that, if Gorbachev is serious, the Soviet working force in its present size, 51% female in composition, will be responsible for expanding the economy at a constant rate of 4.7% annually—in effect, doubling the size of the economy in that fifteen-year period.

What effect is this likely to have upon the fulfilling—that is, in full—of the promise to Soviet women? If past performance is, in fact, the best predictor of future actions, the answer is—unfortunately—all too clear.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


