

# Women and Employment Policy in Contemporary Russia

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**P**rospects and realities in work and employment in 1994 Russia are grim for most women. More than two-thirds of all registered unemployed are women, and those who are employed work largely in lower-paying sectors of the economy. Women's salaries, already low relative to men's, have plummeted, and critical benefits associated with the workplace are dwindling. More than half of all single mothers attempt to get by with incomes below the poverty line. Female employees are very often the first released under cutbacks, and are subject to limited employment opportunities and blatant sexual harassment in the private sector.

Programs to ease the consequences of overall unemployment have been implemented at both federal and local level, often including isolated special programs for unemployed women. As a rule, however, these programs are extremely limited in scope and hampered by flaws in the premises upon which the overarching programs have been established and implemented; moreover, these few programs do not address related issues of discrimination, glass ceilings, wage differentials, and harassment. It is the central contention of this article that, despite some token policy efforts to ameliorate the increasingly difficult situation faced by women in employment, state response in the last three years to the increasing feminization of poverty and unemployment has been largely symbolic.

## Unemployment and Women

Although the official unemployment rate, that is, the number of registered unemployed, is only 1.5 percent of the workforce, this figure excludes those not registered and those on forced unpaid leave or short work weeks, a phenomena connected with the failure to implement the bankruptcy law. Approximately seven out of every eight unemployed workers do not register with the state. Taking into account the latter figures, the Russian State Committee for Statistics (Goskomstat) estimated in Winter 1994 an actual unemployment level of 10.4 percent.<sup>1</sup> More than 50 percent of those were estimated to have been seeking work more than four months. If we include figures for workers at state enterprises with months of overdue unpaid wages, which are presently estimated at three billion dollars, the figure would certainly be higher.<sup>2</sup> Some estimates of actual unemployed go as high as thirteen million workers, or 18 percent of the workforce,<sup>3</sup> and a recent ILO announcement estimated open unemployment at 8 percent, with an additional 33 percent "suppressed" unemployment.<sup>4</sup>

Women comprise 75 percent of the officially registered unemployed, according to Goskomstat.<sup>5</sup> It is unclear just what the actual level of unemployment among women is, since 75 percent of registered unemployed reflects three-fourths of only one-eighth of the

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entire population of unemployed (as opposed to the registered population). It is possible that women are more inclined to register as unemployed if they are more desperate to receive the unemployment support, however tiny that support might be. Men may stay away from official registration at proportionately higher levels than women. Nevertheless, it seems certain that women do compose the majority of the unemployed, and have more serious difficulty in combating that situation.

Why are women so especially hard hit by unemployment? One explanation frequently given is that women are not succeeding in making the shift from public to private sector employment. Women, who comprise 47 percent of the total workforce, fill 48 percent of the workforce in state enterprises, whereas only 25 percent of employees in the private sector are women.<sup>6</sup> Other observers describe limited opportunities for women in the private sector, a "glass ceiling" that limits most women to secretarial-type positions and limits managerial access for women.<sup>7</sup> In state enterprises, fiscal crises have led to regular cutbacks, either straightforward or backhanded (forced unpaid leave or unpaid wages, etc.). State enterprises have an actual incentive to release female employees, especially those with children, first, because they are still required by the state to pay subsidies for children from their own budget, and those subsidies have always been provided through the mother's (and not the father's) salary, regardless of marital status. In a budget crunch, then, releasing or laying off mothers aids the budget in both the salary and subsidy outlays.<sup>8</sup>

In a 1993 study based on interviews at 340 enterprises throughout Russia, ILO expert Guy Standing cites trends toward industrial segregation, with high female shares in garments and textiles and continually shrinking shares in wood products and basic metals. This study also describes a trend of declining relative earnings between women and men, and women's share of training and retraining opportunities within enterprises continues to decline, from 42 percent in enterprises studied in 1992 to 36.3 percent in 1993.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in this study, or at least in the enterprises and interviews involved, these trends were all reported as moderate. Standing concludes that

although women's relative earnings had apparently suffered and although managerial expectations were not encouraging, women's positions in the industrial labour market had weakened only marginally, and it would certainly be an exaggeration to describe the situation as one of actual or imminent marginalization.<sup>10</sup>

It is certainly possible that the information provided by management in these 340 enterprises is representative of the true status of women in industrial employment.

Descriptions from economists and specialists who work with unemployed women, particularly in regions of unusually high unemployment—defense industry towns, etc.—present a more discouraging picture. Economist Zoe Khotkina, who conducts studies on and retraining seminars for unemployed women, claims that women are inevitably the first released at enterprises. "Women are the first to go, to be fired or sent on leave. If they are cutting back to part-time weeks, the men will always work three days and the women two."<sup>11</sup> The fact that women's share among the unemployed was over 70 percent as early as 1991 is perhaps testimony to this. In an unpublished study, Khotkina cites numerous specific, recorded cases wherein employers, state and private, targeted women for firing while retaining male employees. In some regions as many as 90 percent of the newly unemployed are female. Failure to hire a job seeker solely because she is a woman is

considered rational and legitimate, and claims to protest such discrimination are generally ignored. In a comprehensive March 1995 report, Human Rights Watch concludes that “the government actively participates in discriminatory actions and fails to enforce laws that prohibit sex discrimination.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Federal Policy Response**

The 1991 Law on Employment of the Population, although observed and implemented in what is still an early stage (for a number of reasons, including inadequate budgeting from the very beginning), made provisions for restructuring of the Federal Employment Service to serve not just as a clearing agency for job-seekers but as a genuine employment service based on Western (particularly EU-provided) models. Provisions were made for counseling, training and retraining, and other related functions in employment service offices, as well as distribution of unemployment benefits of limited duration (and extremely limited quantity given subsequent raging inflation). The law itself was significant merely for acknowledging in a legal sense that work is not an obligation but a voluntary activity, and connecting the idea of social support with assistance in reemployment.

It must be noted that the overall effectiveness of Federal programs is limited by policies and administrative hangovers from the Soviet period. Employment, as defined, excludes all forms of independent and unofficial employment and includes only those jobs where employees are officially registered with the state. Only those unemployed who are officially registered residents in a region, or *propisenie*, can qualify for any kind of assistance or employment, and other restrictive administrative traditions such as the *trudovaia knizhka* persist. Thus, many of the most needy will be excluded from any federal assistance; and furthermore those who find their own employment or self-support in unofficial capacities will not be reflected in records or statistics (nor will taxes be collected from them).

The European Union, OECD, and other Western organizations have established consulting organizations and grants to help the Federal Employment Service further restructure and to assist materially. In theory, if not in practice, single parents, women with pre-school children, and women with disabled children are posted to “vulnerable categories,” to be targeted for modest additional support, special programs, support groups, and retraining. Procedures and plans, at least according to the Federal Employment Service manual, all correspond nicely to acceptable terms and definitions according to Western precepts. Still, the question remains—Why establish such complex and explicit terms for programs and social support, all to support a benefit structure that consists of a “minimum wage” comprising a fraction of what has already been declared the official subsistence wage? The average unemployment benefit in late 1993, for example, was around 14,000 rubles—the equivalent of a little over ten dollars. The state had calculated the minimum subsistence income level at around 50,000 rubles—a bare minimum level indeed, with food prices approaching those in the United States. It is hardly surprising that the unemployed do not flock to register for such programs. To date this is perhaps a good thing; despite at least two years of foreign consulting and aid on these matters, the (almost non-existent) level of computerization and administrative jumble have barely been altered, and only in a handful of “model offices.”

The Federal Employment Service and the Moscow Department of Work and Employment sponsor occasional seminars and retraining projects for women and the disabled. The Moscow Department also sponsors research efforts regarding women and

unemployment by the Gender Studies Institute, a Moscow chapter of the association "Women and Development," and other groups.<sup>13</sup> By the end of 1992, in joint seminars with Union of Women of Russia, 15,000 women had been assisted, and a retraining program had trained 603 women for new professions in accounting, massage therapy, hairdressing, tailoring, and child-care.<sup>14</sup> Although these professions were chosen because these are positions for which there is a demand, such training does little in the long run to move women out of the low-paying fields already dominated by women. Economist Khotkina, who often teaches these seminars, says the focus is on improving skill, self-image and presentation, interview skills, and so forth. Khotkina has written manuals for these seminars, which are conducted in various parts of Russia.

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She notes that the agencies pay next to nothing for her labors, and she rarely receives even that (not an isolated complaint from academics regarding the Federal Employment Service).

Local and federal policy response is apparently still in a nascent state, despite nearly three years after passage of the Law on Employment of the Population. Those aspects of policy that were relatively straightforward to implement—amounts and terms of unemployment support, etc.—have proven rigid and grossly inadequate to meet the needs of even the most desperate of the unemployed. And, correspondingly, public expectations and confidence in government institutions has plummeted. As early as 1992, All-Russia Center for the Study of Social Opinion survey results indicated that public faith in the state's abilities to provide for them or assist under conditions of unemployment was limited. In answer to the question "How much significant assistance would the state provide you in the event that unemployment were to develop in the country and you found yourself unemployed?" 2 percent responded that the state would provide much help, 29 percent expected a little help, and 28 percent expected no help whatsoever. Likewise, in a March 1992 survey taken from among unemployed visitors to the labor exchange (in other words job-seekers), only 6 percent responded that in a situation of dire poverty they could count on social assistance and support from the state.<sup>15</sup>

### **Political Activism**

Since the fall of the Soviet government, women have made substantial gains in the political arena. In the December 1993 elections to the RF Federal Assembly, women took 11.2 percent of all seats (13.5 in the Duma), a proportion only slightly lower than that occupied in the 1989 USSR Congress of People's Deputies (15.7) and somewhat lower than the 1989 Supreme Soviet (18.5). The majority of these seats were taken by the Union of Women of Russia, which captured 8.1 percent of seats in the Duma.<sup>16</sup> Although several groups combined to form the political party, Women of Russia is in effect the successor organization to the old Soviet Women's Committee, and even operates out of the same building. Although the stated central goal of the Union was to increase female representation in the federal government, at the top of the platform was the issue of unemployment among women. Yet, the party did not portray itself as a feminist party or an advocate of women's rights, and in fact made a point of distancing itself from "feminism." In one pre-election interview, for example, a party representative made statements to the

effect that politics is really the business of men, but women must now step into this area temporarily to compensate for men's failings.<sup>17</sup>

In post-election comments in February 1994, Alevtina Fedulova, president of the Union of Women of Russia and speaker of the State Duma, spoke almost exclusively of women and unemployment. "Unemployment is practically female," she said, citing that in some cities more than 80 percent of unemployed are women. Fedulova explained that employers are no longer reimbursed by the state for benefits disbursed to employees who are mothers, and when workers have to be dismissed, women with children are the first in line. Likewise, in hiring, single men take priority. Fedulova pointed out that women are still concentrated in state-subsidized areas of employment, with 70 percent of health-care and employment workers female. She indicated that the real goal of Women of Russia now is to enact genuine and solid laws that will guarantee women equal rights and opportunity, to force women's concerns onto the agenda, including draft legislation guaranteeing equal hiring/dismissal opportunities and other amendments to labor laws.<sup>18</sup> Fedulova's remarks, to a group of American businesswomen, were markedly more radical and consistent with what might be viewed as very moderate feminism in the West than was the party's pre-election presentation of itself. She appeared to know exactly what her audience expected to hear, and supplied just that.

Before the election campaigns (and subsequent advancing political prominence), Women of Russia was somewhat active in programs to support women in need. Retraining courses, aid to single mothers, and other charitable activities were part of their agenda. Beginning in 1992, job fairs were held for women every two months, as a pilot project in conjunction with the Moscow Department of Employment. Because of this initiative, the Moscow authorities were convinced to take on this project themselves and now conduct separate employment fairs for women once a month. The present-day political reality, however, is that, having set a social safety net as its primary political agenda, Women of Russia has achieved few, if any, gains in practical terms toward social protection of women. As a "centrist" party, Women of Russia has established no clear political identity and has not presented any special leadership within the morass that is the Russian legislature. Throughout 1994, Women of Russia continued to resist industrial layoffs and encourage negotiations and extensions of credits and special considerations for enterprises in trouble. Such a position might be marginally popular in the short run but solves no problems, and disguises the true extent of the economic crisis faced by women.

In campaigns toward the December 1993 elections, the subject of unemployment was addressed, surprisingly, rarely. Women of Russia was the one of only three parties to address it with any regularity, and the only party other than the Communist Party to make the issue a central and critical tenet of its campaign. Notably, Women of Russia also received the third highest percentage of votes in the election, following the Yeltsinite Russia's Choice Party and Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party. Clearly the issue was and is of central importance to the party's most likely constituency—working women.

### **In the Private Sector**

In the private sector, numerous newspapers (for example, *Rabota dlia Vas* [Work for You], and *Priglashaem na rabotu* [Invitation to Work]) have appeared featuring only job listings and advertisements. It is a curious feature of these papers that frequently jobs will list one or the other sex as a requisite for the position. Positions that specify "men" are invariably management positions, where those that request "girls" are almost always for secretarial

or assistant type positions. Appearance is often mentioned, and specifying age is extremely common. Most such positions seek a woman under thirty or twenty-five, attractive, “without complexes,” with a range of job qualifications (degree, foreign languages, etc.). Some positions state that sex will not be a requirement (apparently implying that it is for other positions?); the suggestions that applicants wear a short skirt or that there will be a beauty competition involved have even appeared. Such developments are poor indicators for either equality of opportunity, free of glass ceilings, or harassment-free environments in the private sector.

Commercial employment agencies have developed, taking the opportunity to match prospective employers with employees for a fee. Even the best of these private agencies is limited to only the jobs available or on contract at any time, and women are frequently channeled to positions grossly mismatched with their credentials. One woman, for example, with fluent English, an advanced degree, and fifteen years experience as an executive interpreter in industry, was first offered a position as a sales clerk in a hard currency grocery, for a salary that was at median earnings level. She ended up taking a position with a Western law firm—as receptionist. The position was attractive because her earnings there are two to three times the average, and of all offers and interviews she had through this service, it was the best matched with her skills. Women comprise only 25 percent of employees in the private sector; the fact that discriminatory and sexual behaviors are allowed to go unchecked must surely be considered a factor.

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A significant factor in explaining the dearth of women in private sector management, at least in its earliest phase of development, lies in the fact that opportunities and access to property fell primarily to former members of the party *nomenklatura*—upper spheres traditionally closed to women: *Korporativnost', prisushchaia muzhshinam iz partapparata i direktorskogo korpusa, byla perenesena v sferu biznesa i poetomu neudivitel'no, shto zhenshchin i zdes' okazalos' ne bolee 5 - 3%*.<sup>19</sup> [The corporative system, dominated by men from the party apparatus and the body of enterprise directors, was carried over into the sphere of business and thus it is not surprising that women occupy in this area no more than .5 - 3 percent.] It is then no surprise that private sector entrepreneurship and management are options only for a very small percentage of female job-seekers.

### **Women , Work, and Federal Law**

Many provisions in the current Code of Labor Laws were written with the express purpose of “protecting” female laborers from particular work conditions and providing some benefits for mothers. For example, women are still forbidden by law to work in “dangerous” work conditions or perform “heavy” labor, including driving large vehicles or working in the chemical and metal industries. Terms of night work are also restricted for women by federal law. The law also provides for such conditions as the transfer to lighter forms of labor for pregnant mothers and mothers with toddlers; an extra day off per month for parents of invalids; and time off for pregnancy and birth. But, the above requirements

are to be provided at the expense of the enterprise.<sup>20</sup> It is easy to imagine that such provisions, while originally intended to improve women's social position, might under conditions of mass unemployment work to women's disadvantage in the workplace and in job seeking.

In fact, Human Rights Watch has concluded that such gender-specific protective legislation and "mandated benefits" are blatantly discriminatory and make it impossible for women to compete for work on equal terms. Such legislation clearly violates women's right to freedom from discrimination. Employment practices and laws, regardless of their motivation, that deny or limit women's employment opportunities on the basis of sex violate international and domestic prohibitions against sex discrimination.<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch further concludes that despite rhetoric about promoting women's equality, the Russian government repeatedly fails to enforce any of the existing laws disallowing sex discrimination, ignoring or stifling claims.

In late 1993, a draft family law was introduced in which property rights would have been vested not with individual family members but with the family as a unit. Real and personal property and even personal income would all be considered part of a family budget. This draft legislation was clearly intended to recreate a traditional role for women and encourage male-dominated family structures with stay-at-home mothers. Women with young children were to be restricted from working more than thirty-five hours a week. Even reproductive decisions were to be placed with "family" unit.<sup>22</sup> Although this draft legislation was not passed, its terms will likely reappear in future drafts. Such provisions would deprive women of basic individual freedoms, superimposing some mythical family structure over a society in which the realities of family life are much more complex.

### **Gender and Work in the Soviet Period and Beyond**

Traditionally in the Soviet era women were employed in lower-paying jobs and fields, such as education, light industry, health care, and service industries. In the Soviet era, as late as 1991, women earned on average 60-70 percent of male salaries, explainable in part by differences in education and training, "family situations," and especially by types of work. Today women's pay as a percentage of men's is estimated at 40 percent across all sectors, and less in male-dominated sectors.<sup>23</sup> At least 55 percent of single mothers—and one in five women with children is a single parent—were living below the official poverty line or "subsistence minimum" wage level by March 1994.<sup>24</sup>

The cultural basis for this situation can be traced to severe and ingrained gender roles, stereotypes taught and promoted even in school curricula. Female and male characteristics and personality traits have been and are still considered innate, a product of the natural order. That housework and childnurturing fall into the domain of women's work is considered merely natural. Women should be gentle, kind, and nurturing, while men should be strong, decisive, responsible, and possessive of appropriate masculine pride and authority. It is even considered that in losing their natural bread-winning role, Russian men lose their masculinity, and that lack of appropriate male role models is leading to the "feminization"—in a purely pejorative sense—of male Russian youth.<sup>25</sup>

Soviet presentation of gender roles has thus provided ample ground for adoption, in practice if not law, of policies that discourage women from working, discourage them from leaving certain traditionally female (and low-paying) fields, and penalize them for doing so through harassment. Separate treatment of women in the workplace was, and is, justified by what has been called the "paternalistic ideology of 'privileges and support for women

with children.”<sup>26</sup> As explained above, the financial burden of extra support was borne by enterprises, who find in this situation every motivation to dismiss female workers first of all. Yet, reputable public opinion polls show that a majority of women would be happy to end all of those above-mentioned privileges, except the annual vacation, for the sake of preserving their job.

Since 1991—really since *perestroika*, but most markedly in the last three years—a sharp throwback to what are probably perceived as Russian pre-revolutionary gender roles has been building. Stratification of gender roles was always in evidence, even the under ostensible “equality” of the Soviet years, but is now flaunted and perceived as a natural order. Gender studies specialists describe a situation in which, in addition to economic stratification and exploitation,

in the cultural sphere, on the one hand, there has been increased propaganda about the natural predestination of women which idealizes patriarchal relationships between men and women; while on the other hand, an increase in exploitation of women’s sexuality through pornography and sexual violence.<sup>27</sup>

Leading figures in the government structure at all levels have made public statements in recent years implying that employment displacement and stratification of women is an appropriate solution to prospective unemployment, particularly, they suggest, given that a more “appropriate” work role for women is in the home. In 1993, the Russian labor minister himself questioned why jobs should be found for women if men are still unemployed, noting that “It’s better that men work and women take care of children and do the housework.”<sup>28</sup> This is not the first such statement, nor will it likely be the last. In 1994, in similar comments from advisors close to Yeltsin, it was implied that as long as the chief victims of economic reform continue to be women and the disabled, popular unrest can be kept at a minimum. Draft legislation has even suggested requiring women with children under fourteen to work no more than thirty-five hours in a week, and limiting child care provision and entitlements.<sup>29</sup> Exhibition of these attitudes from such high levels makes it seem unlikely that serious consideration and revision of public and private policy toward women and employment will appear anytime soon.

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### Conclusion

The situation for working women in Russia—which means the vast majority of the female population—has worsened in the three years since the demise of the USSR. Wage and sector stratification, harassment, and discrimination not only persist but expand, as distortions of old gender stereotypes grow. Women are increasingly scapegoated and penalized in an era of harsh and volatile economic conditions: rampant hyperinflation, currency deflation, and sinking personal incomes. Single mothers, single women with aging



parents, and middle-aged professionals are especially vulnerable to displacement and have few options to improve their situations.

The difficulties of women in employment are marginally on the political agenda through the activism of Women of Russia. Women's employment problems are nominally included in state policies regarding unemployment, but as a rule are pursued actively only as a result of joint action with activist political and research organizations. Unemployment itself, let alone its female face, was barely addressed among charity organizations and NGOs by the end of the 1994; less than handful of small, private charity groups could be found to include job placement in their agendas, and only one, in St. Petersburg, was exclusively for women. State agencies function only nominally for the population as a whole, and their efforts, like the legislation passed to establish these agencies, appear to be merely gestures in an attempt to appear responsive. Generally speaking, state response to soaring unemployment and poverty among its female citizens has been a passive one, resulting in preservation and often exacerbation of the dismal status quo.

An increasing female presence in government might be marginally useful, provided that state institutions can recover some level of authority and public faith and attain some efficiency. A slight rise in women's activism, under various auspices, may provide some relief from the consequences of the economic marginalization of women. Unfortunately, however, an overall misunderstanding of and cultural distaste for "feminism," and increasing demands on women's limited time in the mere effort to survive make any organized response to present conditions highly unlikely. In all probability, women and other vulnerable populations will continue to be the economic losers in Russia's political struggles.

## Notes

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14. *Ibid.*
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19. Zoe A. Khotkina, "New Tendencies in Women's Employment," *Women and Social Politics* (Moscow, 1992), 49.
20. *Commentary on Rules and Laws Regarding Labor of the Russian Federation* (Moscow: Verdict, 1993).
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23. Anastasia Posadskaya, Introductory statement, Second Independent Women's Forum, "From Problems to Strategy," Dubna, Russia, November 1992, 6-7.
24. *Moscow Times*, 6 March 1994, quoted from Goskomstat.
25. See Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR*, Chapter 9.
26. Zoe A. Khotkina, "New Tendencies in Women's Employment," 49.
27. Anastasia Posadskaya, "From Problems to Strategy," 7.
28. *Moscow Times*, 30 December 1993.
29. "How High is Russia's Glass Ceiling."