

**RUSSIAN WOMEN IN PUBLIC:  
FROM ORGANIZED ACTIVISM THROUGH DEMOCRATIC EUPHORIA  
TO THE STRATEGY OF SMALL DEEDS**

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**Abstract.** The article provides an overview of the forms of organized women's activism in Russia from its origins until the present day. This includes definitions of different types of women's organizations, their role in women's socialization in Russia, the dynamics of their development, as well as an analysis of the influence of the Western women's movement on the origins of women's NGOs. Special attention is also given to the new forms of women's organizations in modern Russia, their goals, and their working strategies.

**Keywords:** women's activism, political socialization, *zhenotdely* (women's departments of the Communist Party), *zhensovety* (women's councils), Committee of Soviet Women, women's NGOs, independent women's movement, third sector.

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УДК 316,4:331.582.3

**ЖЕНСКИЙ АКТИВИЗМ В РОССИИ:  
ОТ ОРГАНИЗОВАННЫХ ФОРМ,  
ЧЕРЕЗ ДЕМОКРАТИЧЕСКУЮ ЭЙФОРИЮ  
К СТРАТЕГИИ МАЛЫХ ДЕЛ**

**Аннотация.** В статье анализируются формы женского активизма в России от его зарождения до настоящего времени, содержатся определения различных типов женских организаций, выявляются их роль в социализации женщин в России, динамика развития, а также влияние западного женского движения на зарождение и развитие женских НПО. Особое внимание уделено новым формам женских организаций в современной России, их целям и деятельности.

**Ключевые слова:** женский активизм, политическая социализация, женотделы (отделы по работе среди женщин), женсоветы, Комитет советских женщин, женские неправительственные организации, независимое женское движение, третий сектор.

Looking back at the long history of women's activism in Russia, periods of dramatic change, moments of activity, and periods of stagnation in its development all come into view. Thus far, many books and articles on women's activism have been written, its stages of development identified. Undoubtedly, women activists in Russia have done a lot in this area. More important, many of the ideas and concepts of gender theory have become an integral part of modern Russian society. But can we say that the women's movement today is clearly structured and legally formalized? What are the forms of the current women's movement in Russia?

Organized women's activism in Russia has its own long history, shape, and traditions. It originated in the mid-nineteenth century and was based primarily on the twin ideas of mutual aid and assistance to the very poor. It should be noted that among the wide variety of women's organizations today, many of them focus on women in crisis, large families, and single mother households, which is especially typical for women's groups in the provinces.

Women in Russia obtained their civil rights as a result of a long period of activism and the February Revolution of 1917. In October 1917 the Bolsheviks declared the equality of men and women in one of their first legislative acts, which took into consideration the level of women's activism at that time. The declaration did not guarantee equal rights, but did organize a system of social protection for women in the form of benefits and allowances, including maternity leave. This accomplishment can be considered an achievement of the Soviet system. However, in return the state required the full involvement of women in social production. Working outside the home undoubtedly promoted the economic independence and self-confidence of Soviet women.

The formation of a Party department that addressed women's needs, known as *zhenotdely* (women's departments of the Communist Party) allowed women to become involved in socialist ideology. V. I. Lenin established *zhenotdely* in 1919 during the Civil War in order to train women to work in the new society and to involve women in the new political system. *Zhenotdel's* primary goal was to transmit Party propaganda, recruit women, and enable women's political socialization. At the same time, *zhenotdely* helped women to cope with the principles of a new society and integrated women into a new reality. They demanded more social services for poor women, especially single mothers and their children. Moreover, one of the organization's main objectives was to assist

women and serve as an advocate for women's interests. Zhenotdely worked to improve health care services for women and children, develop daycare facilities for working mothers, and address issues of discrimination in the workplace.

It was Stalin who terminated zhenotdely as a national organization in 1930<sup>1</sup>. In the context of rapid industrialization initiated by Stalin's First Five-Year Plan in 1929, there was little interest in developing special social and health services for women; all resources had to be directed toward industrial growth. The Central Committee of the Communist Party concluded that there were sufficient women in soviet, trade-union, plant, and factory committees. In the seventy-four years of the Soviet regime, zhenotdely represent the most concerted attempt at a special agency dedicated to women's issues (Noonan and Nechemias 2001, 190).

In 1941 a new form of women's organizations appeared: the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Women. In 1956 the Committee of Soviet Women was organized out of this framework. Through these committees, women expressed their desire for peace and understanding between peoples, and their solidarity with the women of foreign countries against acts of aggression, and with advocates of democracy and social progress. Although the committees set international goals, they still provided a valuable school for women's political activity, intercultural communication, and an initial renewal of activities for women's organizations.

In 1958 N. S. Khrushchev advocated *zhensoveti* (women's councils) as part of his new approach to building communism. Zhensoveti formed at the regional and municipal levels of administration, as well as in factories, offices, and on farms. Zhensoveti encouraged women to become politically and socially active, and were an attempt to understand the life circumstances of each working woman, her interests, and her desires (Noonan and Nechemias 2001, 191). Zhensoveti's activities continued through the years of L. I. Brezhnev's leadership, but in fact did very little. They were formal rather than active in most areas. Genia Browning, a well-known specialist on Russian women's activism, writes that the lack of knowledge about these organizations reflects their lack of status at the time (Browning 1992, 98-99).

The various initiatives and diversity among the organizations can be explained by the lack of a strong central directive. Where the links were formalized, the organizations varied. Sometimes ties existed with the local soviet or trade unions. Primarily, however, women's councils operated within the parameters defined by Party ideology (Browning 1992, 98-99). Since 1976 the authorities established two commissions: on maternal and

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<sup>1</sup> "Postanovlenie TsK VKP(b) 'O reorganizatsii apparata VKP(b)'" [The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks) Resolution 'On Reorganization of the Apparatus of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks)'.] January 5, 1929." *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo [Party Construction]* 2 (1930). Accessed September 29, 2013. [http://rt-online.ru/archive\\_old/144/10078737/](http://rt-online.ru/archive_old/144/10078737/)

child health as well as women's labor and living conditions, that operated both within the local soviets and at the level of the Supreme Soviets of each republic and the Soviet Union.

Although women's councils lacked full autonomy under Soviet power, they possessed enormous competence: planning of enterprises and organizations for domestic needs, cultural affairs, sporting events, supervision of kindergartens, and so forth, as well as bringing women's issues to the general meetings of the labor collectives. The main function of women's councils was to monitor the implementation of labor laws for women. These organizations dealt with problems in the area of labor and industrial relations, such as increasing the share of female labor in production, the protection of women's work, and the "purely women's issues" of schooling, health care, and other family matters. *Zhensovet* became a viable institution of political socialization and a school of leadership for women.

During the wave of perestroika in 1987, women's councils were revived. The All-Union Conference of Women in January 1987 issued a document, "Regulations of the Women's Councils," which reinstated the organizations within economic enterprises and in certain locales by territory; for example a council might operate within one neighborhood of a city. The goal of women's councils at that time was to involve women in social and political activities and to change their role in managing an increasingly dynamic society and state. Their main activities included participation in developing plans to improve the labor conditions, involvement in budget planning for enterprises' domestic needs, cultural issues, the sports and mass sector, participation in the accounting and allotment of spaces in kindergartens, as well as bringing women's issues to the fore in the general meetings of labor collectives.

The All-Union Conference of Women unleashed the huge hidden energies of women's organizations. Female congresses and conferences took place all across the country. Women's councils formed rapidly and intensively along territorial and industrial lines. In a mere eight months (i.e. by October 1987) there were 160,000 women's councils, encompassing over 1,400,000 activists in the districts, cities, counties, provinces, and autonomous republics (Pukhova 1989, 58-63).

By 1989 roughly 230,000 women's councils existed (250,000 according to the other sources (Noonan and Nechemias 2001, 191)), representing approximately two million members. These organizations were integrated into the structure of the state and represented its power at the local, national, and federal level, as well as at the factories and enterprises. Women's councils paved the way for the emergence of independent women's organizations in the 1990s. The women's council of the Joint Institute of Nuclear Research in Dubna initiated the first independent women's forum, held in Dubna, near Moscow, on March 9-31, 1991. Although independent women's organizations criticized

women's councils for their antidemocratic methods of work and for viewing women as a subject rather than an object of political reforms, it is important to recognize that women's councils helped to originate an independent women's movement in the USSR in the late 1980s. Numerous women's councils, which existed at the enterprise, district, municipal, and regional level, were transformed into independent, nongovernmental associations. At the same time, many women's councils continued to exist and to work during perestroika as the traditional form of women's organizations in Russia.

The dramatic perestroika years, which began in 1985, had a huge impact on women's activity. The removal of state support for socially vulnerable populations, primarily children with various chronic diseases, forced women to organize themselves and overcome difficulties. This society created an environment for civil and political participation. During the transitional period in modern Russia, many independent nongovernmental women's organizations appeared. They were absolutely new organizations for Russia. The first independent women's groups in Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s set concrete tasks, including the defense of women's rights, and the establishment of crisis centers and committees of soldiers' mothers. Subsequent women's organizations addressed a wide array of issues. Even some distinctly feminist organizations emerged at this time.

Women's nongovernmental activism in Russia, which gained power in the early 1990s, built on the example of the Western women's movement, its forms, and its methods of struggle. Modern Western feminism was shaped in the context of powerful social protest in the 1960s. Liberal and Marxist theory (and later psychoanalysis, postmodernism, environmentalism) were essential for its development. Gender theory in Europe and the United States developed in the context of liberal ideology, with an emphasis on individual freedom, law, and free enterprise, which was not the case in Russia. This complicated the adaptation of Western ideas in post-Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, the experience of Western organizations taught valuable lessons to activists of the women's movement in Russia. Intellectual and financial support from Western funds and research organizations, and direct communication with activists of the women's movement played a huge role in the formation of women's organizations and centers of gender research all over the country. Grants supported scholars, promoted their participation in international conferences, and enabled the development of scholarly discourse and the institutionalization of gender disciplines in higher education. Representatives of Western women's organizations and foreign funding agencies promoted liberal values and principles of gender equality, but on "the Western model."

In the mid-1990s a number of publications voiced the necessity of considering cultural and psychological differences between the countries in introducing liberal ideas. According to a number of the American scholars,

including J. Richter, V. Sperling, S. Henderson and others, Western help strengthened the third sector and helped activists to organize their work, but also significantly harmed the natural formation of civil society in Russia (Richter 2002, 55–72; Henderson 2000, 66; Sperling 1999; Sperling 1998). Western funding agencies' undeniably major contributions to the formation of women's activism in our country did not promote women's movement consolidation. On the contrary, the struggle for grants isolated women's organizations from one another and promoted the bureaucratization of women's movement, especially in the capital cities.

Today we witness the decline of nongovernmental women's organizations in Russia. This is primarily because there is no mechanism to ensure gender equality in our country. There are no state legal guarantees of equal rights and opportunities for men and women. Interdepartmental gender commissions in Russia have ceased to exist. No clear state policy exists concerning women, who are represented primarily in social programs that deal with family issues. Thus it appears that organizations with Western agendas have not taken root in Russian soil.

I agree with well-known gender studies theorist A. Temkina that the features of our culture require us to think carefully about how we interpret the problems of gender and the status of women. Without leaving out the differences and possible incompatibility with Western experience, we rather return to the historical context, keeping in mind the seriousness of feminist themes and the acute reaction to them (Temkina 1995, 5–17). However, we can still talk about a rather broad women's movement in modern Russia.

At this point, let us examine the forms of organizations. The first group is the women's councils. For example, in Voronezh region, the *zhensovet* unites roughly 150,000 women activists. A well-built, quite effective working structure of this social organization brings together all the regional to village women's branch councils. In their work, activists stick to the traditional forms, taking into consideration the clear structuring of the organizations, vertical links, and the work forms of the Soviet period. The other example is “*Zhensovety Moskvyy*,” a regional organization that was founded only in 2010 and whose branches extend to every district of Moscow, every major enterprise, and even the largest universities, such as Moscow State University. Its stated purpose is traditional for women' councils: the active involvement of women in social work, charity, health care, assistance to families with disabled members, and close contacts with government.

In light of growing state power in the country, women's councils, having a tradition of working closely with the state, have become even more active. According to researchers, a special, different, state-paternalistic variant of civil society has formed in Russia. *Zhensovety* that can penetrate all spheres of the social organism and mobilize citizens' initiative to address the significant problems are the most stable. In

addition, they are known to be quite socially effective: they allow for the mobilization of citizens' creative activity to address the really important and specific problems of society.

The second group in women's activism today is nongovernmental women's organizations. They face the most urgent issues of the women's movement, namely overcoming the fragmentation of women's organizations, creating a single coordinating center, implementing existing programs, constructing a broad network of regional organizations, and recruiting active and influential activists to the women's NGOs.

Along with traditional forms of women's organization such as women's councils, NGOs, and women's associations, new forms of women's activism, sometimes distant from feminist ideas, have emerged. They include Orthodox women's organizations, for example the Women's Council of the Voronezh-Borisoglebskaia Eparchy. Its main tasks are assistance and support to families of the clergy, families with several children, widows, and nursing homes. Further, it conducts meetings in hospitals and in men's and women's prisons, and provides spiritual assistance to relatives and mothers of sick children. It also engages in actions against abortions (Tkachenko 2013, 26–30). The sole characteristic that distinguishes it from secular zhensoveti is its Orthodox activity, as its focus is the same targeted assistance to those in need.

Additionally, we can see new models of women's activity, for example the merging of women's councils and nongovernmental organizations, and the close cooperation of Orthodox women's organizations with secular regional and district women's councils.

Many women's and gender volunteer organizations and charitable organizations have appeared in recent years. As a rule, the goal of such organizations is immediate assistance or long-term projects aimed at deep-rooted problems of the state. Petersburg Parents (*Peterburgskie roditeli*) is one such example of a gender volunteer organization.<sup>2</sup> Its members help orphans in the maternity hospitals. They work to identify adoptive families and to protect children's rights.

The current stage of the development of women's activism is characterized by "small deeds," with a focus on very specific social problems, among them the achievement of social partnership with authorities and partners in the "third sector," and engagement with the most pressing social problems of violence, including domestic violence, sexism, assistance to women with disabled children, and others. These issues are the primary focus of all types of organizations. Although new and traditional forms of women's activism perform routine everyday activities, through their strategy of small deeds they perform a very

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<sup>2</sup> Otkazniki Peterburga. Sait Regional'nogo obshchestvennogo dvizheniia Peterburgskie roditeli [Denied Persons of Petersburg. Website of the Regional Social Movement "Petersburg Parents"] Accessed September 29, 2013. [http://otkazniki-spb.ru/O\\_nas/Kto\\_my.html](http://otkazniki-spb.ru/O_nas/Kto_my.html)

important role in the gradual establishment of civil society in modern Russia.

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