

# Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia

*Engendering transition*

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Valerie Sperling



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# 1 Russian women's movement groups and activists

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In 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev was selected by his colleagues on the Politburo to become general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, there was only one women's organization in Soviet Russia: the Soviet Women's Committee. It was a state-controlled organization, operating under the watchful eye of Communist Party apparatchiks. A decade later, there were hundreds of women's groups, clubs, initiatives, and projects officially registered and operating in Russia. Estimates put the number of unregistered groups at several thousand. Relative to the previous decades of Soviet rule, this increase represented a tremendous surge in civic action, spurred by the political and economic transitions that began in the late 1980s under Gorbachev and continued under Yeltsin's administration. Along with women's groups, a multitude of other "informal" organizations formed, including independent trade unions, a variety of noncommunist political groups, and environmentalist and antinuclear power movements. Emerging from decades of totalitarian<sup>1</sup> control into a chaotic political and economic environment, Russian society was attempting to organize itself.

Women activists had their work cut out for them. And, as though making up for lost time, women began to protest against the economic and political discrimination that seemed to intensify as the transition period wore on. Within a few short years, the single-organization Soviet women's movement had been replaced by a multifaceted spectrum of women's activism.

<sup>1</sup> Scholars have used the term "totalitarian" to represent a range of beliefs about the nature of politics under communist (and nazi) rule. Whereas I would not join those scholars who argued that the Soviet state was monolithic and unchanging, I find that the term captures the extent to which the state and Communist Party monopolized the public sphere in the Soviet Union, and employ it descriptively for that purpose. For a concise discussion of the scholarly debate over the accuracy and utility of the totalitarian model, see George Breslauer, "In Defense of Sovietology," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1992), pp. 197–237.

### **A brief history of the contemporary Russian women's movement**

Early Soviet history is hardly devoid of dedicated women activists. After the 1917 revolution, Alexandra Kollontai and other female Bolsheviks conducted organizational work among women, with the dual intent of mobilizing female support for the new Soviet regime, and ridding society of its “backward” manifestations that helped keep women subordinated to men.<sup>2</sup> In 1919, their efforts crystallized in the creation of the *zhenotdel* – the Women’s Department of the Communist Party’s Central Committee Secretariat. Local women’s departments were established, and *zhenotdel* agitators traveled throughout the country carrying the message of women’s liberation, meeting with women in factories, villages, and local bathhouses. Their concerns and activities ranged from politics to maternity care; from ending prostitution and illiteracy to eliminating what Lenin had called “stultifying and crushing [household] drudgery” with the establishment of collective childcare and eating establishments.<sup>3</sup> *Zhenotdel* activists also traveled to remote areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus, encouraging women to discard their veils and reject other patriarchal Muslim practices. Hundreds of newly “liberated” women were attacked and even murdered for their defiance of tradition. The *zhenotdel* activists were widely feared by local men, who opposed, often violently, the efforts of these strange emissaries of the new regime.<sup>4</sup>

From its inception, the *zhenotdel* met with opposition even from within the party: some feared that women’s concerns would compete with workers’ concerns.<sup>5</sup> In 1930, Stalin decreed that women in the Soviet Union were free, equal, and emancipated, having been liberated by the revolution. His Politburo promptly disbanded the *zhenotdel*.<sup>6</sup> According to the Soviet leadership, women had no further need of women’s organizations; such autonomous groupings could only distract

<sup>2</sup> For a lively and detailed study of women revolutionaries, see Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Also see *Alexandra Kollontai: Selected Writings*, trans. with intro. and commentary by Alix Holt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> V. I. Lenin, *The Woman Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1951), p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Stites recounts the experiences of *zhenotdel* activists in graphic detail. See *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 329–45.

<sup>5</sup> See Gail Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), chs. 1, 2; and Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> See Wendy Goldman, “Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion and the Death of the Proletarian Women’s Movement in the USSR,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 55, no. 1 (Spring 1996), p. 63.

women from the process of building communism “cheek by jowl” with men.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Stalin's proclamations, women in the Soviet Union experienced significant discrimination over the course of Soviet rule. Segregated in the labor force into the least-prestigious and lowest-paying jobs and industrial sectors, women were expected to perform all the domestic chores and childrearing tasks as well. This produced a female work week twice as long as men's, which became known as the “double burden.” Although there was a quota of 33 percent for women in the Supreme Soviet, which functioned as a rubber-stamp legislature, women were few and far between in the Communist Party bodies that in fact ran the country. Communist rhetoric about equality between men and women was declarative, not reflective of reality.

By the late 1960s, Soviet policy debates had begun to reflect an awareness of these problems.<sup>8</sup> At that time, Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev had declared that the Soviet polity, while well on its way toward full-fledged communism, was still struggling with obstacles, labeled “nonantagonistic contradictions.” Among these was an apparent conflict between women's productive and reproductive roles.<sup>9</sup> As birth rates fell and economic productivity declined, Soviet analysts openly concluded that the “woman question” had not, in fact, been solved.

The 1970s brought increasing debate over gender roles and sexual equality. Within the Soviet policy community, social scientists argued that women were having difficulty “combining participation in the workforce and in political life with domestic labor.”<sup>10</sup> Fear that a declining birth rate would create problems of labor supply in the future drove a variety of policy prescriptions designed to facilitate women's combination of paid labor and household work. Yet, as Mary Buckley persuasively argues, the goal of these debates was to address the effects of women's double burden on economic productivity and the future supply of labor, and not to encourage women's “self-determination” per se.<sup>11</sup>

For the most part, women in the Soviet Union did not unite to protest against sex-based inequality or the double burden. Under Soviet rule, the formation of any organizations independent of the Soviet party-state was strictly forbidden. Whereas independent interest groups and social movement organizations abounded in the West, the Soviet Union – until

<sup>7</sup> See Olga Voronina, “Soviet Women and Politics: On the Brink of Change,” in Barbara J. Nelson and Najma Chowdhury, eds., *Women and Politics Worldwide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 728, quoting *Pravda*, March 8, 1936.

<sup>8</sup> For a thorough discussion of these policy debates, see Buckley, *Women and Ideology*, especially chs. 5 and 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162–63.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187–88.

glasnost and perestroika took root – tolerated only state-run organizations, such as the Soviet Women’s Committee. And like the other “mass” organizations of the Soviet era, the Soviet Women’s Committee was designed to mobilize the population to carry out party goals, rather than to address women’s concerns as such.

After its inception in 1941, when it was founded as an “antifascist” organization, the Soviet Women’s Committee remained for five decades the only legal organization said to represent women in the Soviet Union. The attempt by a small group of Soviet women to organize an underground women’s journal, in 1979, was swiftly repressed; their editorial collective was forcibly disbanded by the KGB, and several of its members were deported.<sup>12</sup>

Glasnost and perestroika swiftly altered the opportunities available to women who wished to publicly express dissent over their treatment as women in Russian society. Under Gorbachev’s new policies, it became legal to assemble in public; to organize groups; to register such organizations with the state; to publish newsletters and journals; and even to start independent political parties. Under these new conditions, women’s accumulated frustration over being treated as second-class citizens erupted. In the late 1980s, the seeds of this dissidence took root and flourished in the form of tiny feminist organizations, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg. These groups took on the function of consciousness-raising clubs.<sup>13</sup> In the early 1990s, another wave of women’s organizing took place, this one motivated by the growing economic crisis and rapid reduction in social welfare benefits (such as state-subsidized childcare) that women had come to rely on during the years of Soviet power. A vast number of self-help groups and employment-training organizations formed, trying to bridge the gap that the collapse of the centrally planned welfare state had left behind. In essence, these pragmatically based groups sought to find the resources to perform the tasks that the state had chosen to abandon.

By early 1994, Russia’s Ministry of Justice had officially registered over 300 women’s groups (a process which enables an organization to open bank accounts and conduct financial transactions, rent office

<sup>12</sup> See Robin Morgan, “Foreword,” in Tatyana Mamonova, ed., *Women and Russia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. ix.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the earliest such groups included Preobrazhenie (Transfiguration; registered in 1990), Klub Garmoniia (Club Harmony; registered in 1990), LOTOS (founded in 1988), and SAFO (Free Association of Feminist Organizations; registered in 1990). See Valentina Konstantinova, “Women’s Political Coalitions in Russia (1990–1994),” in Anna Rotkirch and Elina Haavio-Mannila, eds., *Women’s Voices in Russia Today* (Brookfield, VT: Dartmouth Publishing, 1996), pp. 235–47.



space, and publish information under its name),<sup>14</sup> and many more existed, operating “unofficially.”<sup>15</sup> These organizations ranged from small, local groups to larger national organizations with regional subdivisions, and also included several national-level networks of women's groups, headquartered in Moscow.

The activists leading these varied women's organizations viewed and described themselves as part of a small, emergent women's movement, advocating on women's behalf. They were conscious of and objected to pervasive discrimination against women, and engaged in a wide variety of movement activities attempting to raise women's political, economic, and social status in Russian society. Russian women's movement groups have lobbied the Supreme Soviet and its parliamentary successor, the Russian Duma, as well as local legislatures; campaigned on behalf of women politicians; organized large conferences involving hundreds of women, starting in 1991; held fairs and other charity events providing material assistance to women and children; organized self-help groups and consultation/support services in order to combat rising unemployment and the declining availability of daycare and other social services; organized employment-training, business-management, and leadership-training programs for women; created support groups for single mothers, women artists, and women entrepreneurs; held countless roundtables, seminars, and lectures on feminism and women's issues; established rape crisis and domestic violence hotlines; founded a women's radio station; conducted self-esteem workshops for women and other consciousness-raising activities; published and distributed women's publications (largely small-run newsletters and journals); conducted research on women; lobbied the media to cover women's issues and movement events more extensively; organized occasional pickets and small demonstrations; and, last but not least, registered their organizations – itself no small achievement in the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the Russian Ministry of Justice.

Russia's emerging women's organizations catalogued themselves with the state over a period of several years, beginning in October 1990, when it became legal to constitute an “informal” organization and register it with the Soviet government. In early 1991, the government of the Russian Republic passed its own law on the formation and registration of autonomous organizations. This registration process was

<sup>14</sup> On registration, see Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> Ol'ga Samarina, interview, March 24, 1995. Also, see “Doklad o vypolnenii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii Konventsii o likvidatsii vsekh form diskriminatsii v otnoshenii zhenshchin: chetvertyi periodicheskii doklad (predstavlen v sootvetstviu so stat'ei 18 Konventsii)” (Moscow: Ministry of Social Protection, 1994), p. 24.

“complicated and subject to arbitrary interpretation by officials.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, women’s organizations took advantage of the new laws, and registered in increasing numbers. SAFO, the Free Association of Feminist Organizations (in reality, a small group of feminists, which later changed its name to FALTA – the Feminist Alternative), claimed to be the first openly feminist organization to have been officially registered. They achieved this status in fall 1990, and soon set about conducting consciousness-raising groups and seminars for women, publishing their occasional journal (*FemInf*), and helping to organize and sponsor the first national conference of independent women’s organizations.<sup>17</sup> Others followed quickly.<sup>18</sup>

Despite obstacles to networking that have arisen and been exacerbated during the transition period, these nascent organizations were not completely isolated from each other. The first major opportunity for networking among women’s groups independent of the state in the former Soviet Union arose in March 1991 at a national conference called the First Independent Women’s Forum, which was followed by a second Forum in late 1992. Both of these were held in Dubna, a town on the outskirts of Moscow. The organizers labeled the Forums “Independent” to stress their identity independent of the Soviet state, the Communist Party, men, and the official Soviet Women’s Committee. The Forums represented new opportunities for contact between activists from feminist-identified organizations and those from the economically oriented groups. Given the shortcomings of the Soviet and post-Soviet communications infrastructure, such national meetings provided rare opportunities for women activists to network and share information about their organizations’ activities. National conferences, sponsored by independent women’s movement networks (and also by the Russian government) in recent years have perpetuated these otherwise limited networking opportunities.

On the basis of such contacts, between 1991 and 1995 four separate (but in places, overlapping) networks of women’s organizations appeared in Moscow. Out of the two Forums emerged a network of activists and women’s organizations operating independently of the state, called the Independent Women’s Forum (IWF), which maintained an aura of independence and radicalism. In 1993, the Women’s League, also a nonhierarchical network of organizations that came

<sup>16</sup> M. Steven Fish, *Democracy from Scratch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 59–60.

<sup>17</sup> Marina Regentova and Natal’ia Abubikirova, no title, unpublished typescript, Moscow, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Of the registered organizations in my sample, three registered in 1990, ten in 1991, ten in 1992 (the peak for registration in Moscow), six in 1993, and eight in 1994.

together after a conference ("Women and the Market Economy," held in Moscow in 1992), was established. While the Women's League, like the IWF, was formed independent of the state, it was viewed as more establishment-oriented and less radical than the IWF (not pursuing, for example, issues like violence against women). In 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Women's Committee (SWC) disappeared and was replaced in Russia by the Union of Russia's Women (URW). The URW was an umbrella network including numerous smaller women's councils, as well as independent, pragmatically oriented women's organizations operating under its aegis. Although the URW (unlike the SWC) was no longer supported directly by the state, it was nonetheless perceived by independent women's groups as being part of the state system and, thus, as nonindependent. The fourth network was a joint operation between women's organizations in the United States and the former Soviet Union (mostly in Russia), called the US-NIS Consortium and established in 1994. The Consortium, with Western funding and leadership, brought together members of the Women's League and the IWF in a somewhat uneasy coalition which later became transformed into a Russian-operated network, headed by one of the founders of the Women's League. Despite conflicts and disagreements, as of 1995, all the networks shared the goal of improving women's status in Russia, all were to varying degrees involved in politics, and all asserted their independence from the state.<sup>19</sup>

In the mid-1990s, the women's groups operating in Russia ranged in size from tiny groups of friends to organizations with branches in dozens of Russian regions boasting memberships of several thousand. Many of these groups were affiliated with one (or more) of the women's movement organizational networks in Moscow. This flowering of women's organizations in a country where nonstate organizations had been illegal until the mid-1980s is remarkable, both for its speed and its extent.

The Russian women's movement has been in many ways Moscow-centered.<sup>20</sup> As Russia's capital, Moscow is where lobbying and other forms of mobilization aimed at changing policies at the national level (such as Russia-wide women's conferences) tend to take place. Moscow's women's movement is complex, with dozens of active organizations focusing on consciousness-raising, employment training, professional

<sup>19</sup> Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan See provide information on the history of three of these networks – the IWF, the URW, and the Women's League – as well as background information on some of the leaders of these networks in *Women's Activism in Contemporary Russia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> St. Petersburg also has a rich tradition of women's organizing. See Jane Berthussen Gottlick, "Organizations in the New Russia: Women in St. Petersburg" (dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1996).

support, violence against women, political advocacy, and more. Also, Moscow serves as the site for the headquarters of many “national” and “interregional” women’s movement organizations (those with branches in other cities), as well as being home to local Moscow women’s groups and the main women’s movement networks mentioned above. Russia’s vastness and diversity makes it inadvisable to generalize about the “Russian” women’s movement purely on the basis of the movement as it appears in Moscow. Moscow is, however, the city with the largest number of women’s organizations, the highest frequency of women’s movement events, and many of the most politically oriented women’s organizations in Russia.

This book explores two additional cities – Ivanovo and Cheboksary – that permit a more representative peek at the women’s movement outside Moscow and Russia’s other major urban centers. Ivanovo lies about six hours northeast of Moscow by train, and is dominated by the textile industry. Cheboksary is the capital of the ethnic republic of Chuvashiia, situated on the Volga river about midway between Moscow and the Ural mountains, over fifteen hours by train away from Russia’s capital.

The three cities are characterized by several important differences which affect their women’s movements. Both Ivanovo and Cheboksary are much smaller than Moscow, with populations of about 400,000 and 500,000 respectively, compared to Moscow’s approximately 9 million. Indeed, Ivanovo, because of its female-dominated textile industry, was known during the Soviet period as the “city of brides.” The pace of life in Cheboksary and Ivanovo is slower than that in the capital. The provincial cities are observably poorer than Moscow, and relatively less affected by the influx of imported goods, conspicuous consumption, and the renaming of streets and city squares to erase and repudiate the Soviet communist past. The three cities are located at varying distances from both political reforms and contact with the West, with Moscow residents having the highest rate of contact with Westerners and Western ideas. By contrast, in Cheboksary, a foreigner is still regarded as something of a novelty. Ivanovo is significantly closer to Moscow; Ivanovites can travel to Moscow more frequently than can residents of Cheboksary. Additionally, the three regions suffer from different degrees of unemployment and industrial collapse: the lowest unemployment rate is found in Moscow province, and the highest in Ivanovo province, with the republic of Chuvashiia in between, but much closer to Ivanovo’s level. Finally, the cities differ on an ethnic basis. Cheboksary is the capital of a republic populated largely by people of Chuvash nationality, with a minority Russian population. By contrast, Ivanovo and Moscow are Russian-dominated, although Moscow, as the capital of the former

Soviet Union, is ethnically quite diverse. Despite these important differences, the basic desire to improve women's status was a driving force behind organizing in all three areas.

### **Indigenous organizations, civil society, and the formation of Russian women's movement groups**

What were the roots of the women's organizations in these three cities? On what basis were they founded, and what enabled them to come together so rapidly between the end of the 1980s and mid-1990s?

Social movements tend to form and grow on the basis of networks and existing civic associations, sometimes referred to as "indigenous organizations." It is through such organizations that social movement networks form, allowing the movement to expand by recruiting new adherents.

The role played by indigenous organizations is complicated in the Russian case because of the paucity of civic organizations that existed under Soviet rule. "Civil society," a realm located theoretically between the "state" and the private sphere of household, family, and friendships, was largely absent from Soviet and post-Soviet Russian society. Public participation in civic associations was restricted to participating in the "mass" organizations run by the Communist Party – these ranged from trade unions to peace committees to the Soviet Women's Committee – all monitored by and responsible to state functionaries. This absence of civil society has restricted networking and movement expansion along associational lines, and not only for the women's movement. People inclined toward nonstate activism, once it became permitted in the late 1980s, had limited arenas in which to conduct popular outreach, beyond the state-run organizations.

These state-run organizations did serve, after a fashion, as indigenous organizations which formed the basis for social movement networking. The Soviet Women's Committee (SWC), and the women's councils (*zhensovety*) under its auspices, acted as incubators for women's groups that later emerged as organizations no longer run by the state. For example, a women's political club was allowed to form within the SWC in 1990; one of its founders later went on to form her own organization, the Women's Alliance. Numerous women's councils, which existed in factories as well as territorially (at the district, city, and provincial level) also developed independent streaks, and transformed themselves into "informals" – independent, nonstate associations.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Elena Zabadykina, "Zhenskii organizatsii sankt-peterburga," *Vse liudi sestry*, no. 5, 1996, p. 9.

Some of the women's councils remained part of the SWC, but were nonetheless quite strong and active in their communities; the Ivanovo city *zhensovet* (now the City Union of Women) is only one example of such an organization.<sup>22</sup>

Other state- and party-run organizations, including the Komsomol (the Soviet youth organization) and the party structures themselves, also produced activists who, in the late Gorbachev era, were eager to apply their energies and organizing skills to the creation of "informals." State-run academic institutions also served as a source of activists for late Soviet-era social movements. In this somewhat counterintuitive sense, the Soviet legacy of monopolistic, centralized, state- and party-run institutions thus assisted in the creation of civil society during the transition period.

Analysis of women's organization formation in Moscow, Cheboksary, and Ivanovo reveals that, absent civic organizations through which to recruit, the women's groups formed mostly on the basis of friendship networks, acquaintanceship through the workplace (though not through trade unions) or work-related professional activity (attendance at conferences), as well as through participation in Soviet-era organizations related to the state or Communist Party. The latter was the mode most often found in Cheboksary and Ivanovo, particularly because several leading activists there had worked for party- and state-related structures. Across the three cities, approximately one-third of the organizations were formed on the basis of personal acquaintanceship, friendship, or attendance at the same educational institution. The leaders of another third of the organizations met as colleagues in the workplace, at professional meetings, or conferences. A handful became acquainted through work in women's councils, the Soviet Women's Committee, the Communist Party, or the Komsomol, and a few formed their organizations by running ads in a newspaper, or after meeting like-minded women at women's movement events. Several of the leaders interviewed pointed to the fact that their having come together with other women, with whom they would later form an organization, had been purely "accidental" or happenstance.

Although friendship and collegial ties created effective core activists in Russia's women's movement (as is often the case in social movements), it becomes evident, when considering the possibilities for the expansion of the women's movement into broader society, that such expansion would require attracting new adherents to already existing organizations

<sup>22</sup> On the history of the Ivanovo women's council (up to 1989), see Genia Browning, "The Zhensovet Revisited," in Mary Buckley, ed., *Perestroika and Soviet Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 97–117.

and networks. Here, the Soviet legacy of minimal civic institutions again becomes relevant. Many of the women's movement organizations retained very small numbers of activists and members; their core group remained the same as the original group of founders and, often, the organization itself did not exceed that core group. The continued absence of popular indigenous civic organizations, which could play a recruitment role similar to that of black churches during the US civil rights movement, makes networking and increasing the size of extant organizations difficult. Civic networks (e.g., the human rights movement, the environmental movement, and the independent labor movement) are relatively new to the Russian scene. They may serve as breeding grounds for women's movement adherents in the future, especially as the paths of activists from those organizations cross with those of feminist activists at training sessions and seminars designed for leaders of civic associations.<sup>23</sup>

The overall level of civic organization in society determines, to some degree, the potential paths and access points through which new participants can be mobilized. Russia's largest cities, like Moscow and St. Petersburg, provide the most opportunities for movement expansion, through parallel movements, local conferences, and contacts with other regional activists at national conferences. Considerably more rural areas like Chuvashiia, operating with a lesser degree of nonstate organization in general, present fewer opportunities for recruitment and, thus, their organizations may remain smaller.

Finally, social movement researchers have claimed that women's movement expansion (beyond those people who already consider women's rights to be highly important or salient to them personally) is facilitated by membership in civic associations and labor force participation. In the United States, these have proven to be an important means by which women who consider women's rights to be relatively "less important" nevertheless become involved in feminist activism (by donating money to women's movement organizations, for example).<sup>24</sup> In Russia, the expansion of the movement's participant base may prove difficult given the limited degree of popular membership in other civic associations (through which to recruit), and the decline (in recent years)

<sup>23</sup> Valentina Konstantinova, interview, July 9, 1995. Women may also find themselves attracted to the women's movement after encountering sexism within other social movements, as was the case for some women in the civil rights and New Left movements in the United States. See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Random House, 1980).

<sup>24</sup> Pat Dewey Dauphinais, Steven E. Barkan, and Steven F. Cohn, "Predictors of Rank-and-File Feminist Activism: Evidence from the 1983 General Social Survey," *Social Problems*, vol. 39, no. 4 (November 1992), pp. 332–44.

of women's labor force participation. For the present, however, the organizations constituting the Russian women's movement are not apparently concerned with expanding their numbers; they are more occupied with pursuing their goals and attempting to initiate social change on their chosen issues through methods that do not require mass membership and mobilization.

### **Types of women's organizations in Russia**

What kinds of organizations now populate the growing Russian women's movement? What are their primary concerns? What issues do they focus on, and what are their goals?

Given the decline in women's economic status during the early 1990s, it comes as no surprise that a significant number of groups are concerned precisely with employment issues. These include women's job-training programs, often in conjunction with a local branch of the federal employment services, such as Ivanovo's Center for the Social Support of Women and Families, or Moscow's Center for the Social Support of Women (operating under the Union of Russia's Women). Such organizations frequently teach courses in embroidery, handicrafts, and sewing, or accounting, governess training, and, sometimes, business skills. This category also includes groups of businesswomen (new entrepreneurs) who mentor and provide support to one another, such as the Cheboksary-based Women's Initiative club, or Moscow's Dzhenklub (Businesswomen's Club). Other groups, including the Association of Women Entrepreneurs, seek to provide jobs for women by promoting and developing women's entrepreneurship.<sup>25</sup> This category also includes women in some of the industries hardest hit by the economic crisis, such as the defense industry, which lost major government contracts during the transition period and has been faced with high levels of female unemployment, especially in research institutes. The main group representing that subcategory is the association Conversion and Women.

Also present are a large number of mutual support groups for mothers in a variety of categories. These include groups for single mothers, mothers of many children (usually three or more), and mothers of disabled children. This category also includes charitable organizations intended to help the neediest people, among whom women and children constitute the majority. Belonging to this group are large organizations like the International Association of Russian Women-Mothers, who

<sup>25</sup> Tat'iana Maliutina, interview, April 25, 1995.



raise money to send sick children from across the former Soviet Union to Italy for healthcare and rest, and many *zhensoveti*, some of which have reorganized on a private basis, like Women of Krasnaia Presnia, a former district women's council in Moscow. The latter organization distributes material aid (in the form of fabric, soap, and other household necessities), and holds celebratory events on holidays, from March 8th (International Women's Day) to Children's Defense Day, Blockade Defenders' Day, and Easter.<sup>26</sup> These organizations, like the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (perhaps the most well-known women's organization in Russia, dedicated to ensuring the observance of human rights within the Russian army, helping young men leave the army, lobbying for alternative service, and speaking out against wars), are devoted not so much to altering women's status at the societal level as to supporting families and children.

Other types of support groups exist for professional women in various fields, including: SANTA (for women in law enforcement); Women with a University Education (RAUW); the Association of Women Journalists; and the Association of Women [Film and Theater] Directors. The leader of the latter group explained that her organization was needed for material support, helping to finance women directors' projects, and also for psychological support, "So women [in this field] won't feel like they're alone."<sup>27</sup> Lesbian support organizations now exist, such as MOLLI, the Moscow Organization of Lesbian Literature and Art.<sup>28</sup>

The last few years have seen the development of women's crisis services, including hotlines for victims of rape and domestic violence, in nearly every major Russian city (e.g., the "Sisters" Rape Crisis Center, and the Moscow Crisis Center for Women). Consciousness-raising organizations, such as the feminist co-counseling group, Feminist Alternative (FALTA), and Klub Garmoniia (Club Harmony), and monthly lecture groups that invite people to speak about their research on women, such as Klub F-1 (First Feminist Club), also operate in the capital.

Other women's groups are associated with political parties. These include Women for Social Democracy, whose goals include involving more women in political decisionmaking, and "uniting women on the basis of social-democratic values,"<sup>29</sup> and the hardline communist Congress of Soviet Women.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Nina Tiuliulina, interview, May 22, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Elena Demeshina, interview, March 26, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, November 27, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, November 22, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Natal'ia Belokopytova, interview, May 12, 1995.

Finally, a few women's groups (e.g., Equality and Peace), research centers (e.g., the Moscow Center for Gender Studies – MCGS), and network-organizations (the aforementioned Women's League, the Inform Center of the Independent Women's Forum, and the Union of Russia's Women) include specialists on women's issues; they lobby state officials and conduct advocacy work on women's issues, as well as providing information and networking opportunities to women's organizations across Russia by holding seminars and national conferences.

### **Conceptual frameworks for categorizing women's organizations**

The spectrum of women's movement organizing in Russia is quite extensive. On what dimensions or axes can the groups best be analyzed? Some theorists of women's movement organizing make an analytical division between "practical" and "strategic" groups, where the former are occupied with addressing immediate needs, and the latter are focused directly on the long-term goals of undermining institutionalized discrimination and sexism (such organizations are usually described as "feminist").<sup>31</sup> This framework may be criticized on several levels. First, there seems to be an inherent bias toward privileging "strategic" groups as the ones that are necessarily most "feminist," a distinction that, especially outside the First World, seems artificial.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, many women's organizations cross the line between ostensibly "practical" and "strategic" goals. Certainly, this is true in contemporary Russia, particularly because of women's increasingly poor economic conditions. For instance, some organizations adopt multiple goals, hoping to assist women in the short term with job training (practical activities), and also trying to alter discriminatory hiring policies in the longer term, by lobbying (strategic activities). It is difficult to categorize such organizations along this binary spectrum. Thirdly, the distinction between short-term (practical) and long-term (strategic) methods of acting on women's behalf appears fundamentally to be false. Whatever the methods used – whether "practical," such as enrolling particular women

<sup>31</sup> Such a distinction, between "strategic" and "practical" groups in the Brazilian women's movement, is made by Sonia Alvarez. See her "Women's Movements and Gender Politics in the Brazilian Transition," in Jane Jaquette, ed., *The Women's Movement in Latin America* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 28–29. Alvarez bases her distinction on Maxine Molyneux's description of strategic and practical "gender interests." See Molyneux, "Mobilization Without Emancipation?: Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Summer 1985), pp. 232–33.

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to Myra Marx Ferree for her criticism of this dichotomy.

in an employment-retraining program, or “strategic,” such as lobbying for enforcement of gender-neutral hiring practices – it seems that the underlying goal is the same: to prevent instances of discrimination, and to improve women's social status, both of which are ostensibly the work of “strategic” organizations.

Moreover, the leaders of Russia's self-help and support groups (which might be conceived of as “practical”) recognize and name sex-based discrimination as a problem, suggesting that they share the goals and understandings of “strategic” groups. Nor do the “practical” groups avoid political channels as their means of seeking influence and social change. Finally, the fact that women leaders from groups of both categories overwhelmingly agree that women experience discrimination in contemporary Russian society suggests that their struggle is a strategic (or “feminist”) one, whether or not they choose to adopt that label. In sum, perhaps particularly during political and economic transition periods, the practical and the strategic are conflated.

The distinction, however, is useful as a descriptive shorthand in the Russian case. Strategic groups include those organizations occupied with promoting (largely) liberal feminism and women's empowerment (for example, the advocacy organizations, women's research centers, and consciousness-raising groups), although the latter are not necessarily interested in political participation or lobbying. Their overt intention is to improve women's status and/or struggle against discrimination in the long term. The practical groups, by contrast, are those trying to take up the slack resulting from the collapse of the state welfare system by organizing, through cooperation, to combat women's immediate problems (this category includes business-training and employment centers, charities, single-mothers' groups, and so on). Throughout the text, I refer to “pragmatic” organizations as those that focus mostly on issues of women's and families' welfare during the economic transition period. This use of the terms is not meant to suggest a sharp analytical distinction between “strategic” and “practical,” but rather is a means of denoting the overall issue-focus of the organizations.

For analytical purposes, the women's movement organizations in this text can best be categorized on the following set of dimensions:

1. Issue-focus: What issues is the organization primarily concerned about? What are its main goals and purposes?
2. Politicization: Does the organization seek to influence the state, either by getting resources from it or by affecting policies? Or does it not posit such a goal?
3. Is the organization identified with the state historically or not?

4. At what level (municipal, regional, interregional, national, international) does the organization operate?
5. When was the organization founded and/or registered?
6. What size is the organization? Who belongs to it?

In table 1, I have divided the organizations in my sample into six major categories – those occupied with advocacy; self-help and support; consciousness-raising; opposition to violence against women; cultural promotion; and publishing. Despite variation in their specific concerns, almost all of the women's movement organizations referred to in this text share the same underlying goal, namely, altering women's status, understood broadly. Some organizations work to change women's status temporarily or on an individual basis (those organizations that engage in activism on "pragmatic" issues, the self-help and mutual support groups, and the women's crisis centers and hotlines). Although some of the self-help and mutual support organizations may not challenge the social order explicitly, even those groups operating within limited parameters are changing women's status – one woman at a time. Other groups seek to change women's status over the long term, with an eye toward overtly critiquing the division of labor in society, gender roles, patriarchy, and so on (these include the organizations that engage in lobbying on issues of sex-based discrimination, the research organizations, and the consciousness-raising groups).<sup>33</sup>

From table 1, where a number of groups appear in more than one location, it is evident that many organizations set multiple goals. This suggests that there are more issues and problems that people seek to resolve or address than there are groups to handle them. It also suggests that groups have not become narrowly specialized (although specialization may develop later as the movement expands). While several relatively narrow interest groups have emerged, many organizations have adopted a range of goals, issues, and strategies, and are striving to improve women's status along a variety of lines simultaneously. Thirty percent of the organizations in the table cross several boundaries, including the Union of Russia's Women (URW) network, which engages in both political advocacy and charity work across the country.

Organizational desire to influence the state (or the degree of "politicization") provides another dimension along which to categorize these groups. The politicization issue supplies little variation. Only 25 percent of the organizations interviewed stated that they neither influence the

<sup>33</sup> Even the Congress of Soviet Women, a hardline communist group, sought to alter the status quo for women ("to defend women's rights"), although their organization's main concern was an ideological one ("to reestablish the Soviet Union on a socialist basis"): Natal'ia Belokopytova, interview, May 12, 1995.

Table 1. *Groups by type and specific issue-focus*

Specific focus	Names of groups (Moscow-based unless otherwise noted)
Advocacy	
Discrimination issues	Equality and Peace; Inform Center of the IWF; URW; Women's League; Women for Social Democracy; Dzhenklub; MCGS; Association "Women and Development"; Center for Issues of Women, Family, and Gender Studies, at the Youth Institute
Pragmatic welfare issues	Cheboksary city <i>zhensovet</i> ; Chuvash republic <i>zhensovet</i> ; City Union of Women (Ivanovo); Single-Parent Families Committee (Ivanovo); Klub Delovaia Zhenshchina (Ivanovo); Women's Liberal Fund; Congress of Soviet Women
Self-help and support	
Job training	URW; Center for Social Support of Women and Families (Ivanovo); Urals Association of Women
For professionals	<i>Arts</i> : Sofia; Tvorchestvo; MOLLI; Association of Women [Film and Theater] Directors. <i>Law enforcement</i> : SANTA. <i>Defense industry</i> : Conversion and Women. <i>Women with a university education</i> : Association of University Women; Association of University Women (Chuvash branch).
Entrepreneurship	Dzhenklub; Association of Women Entrepreneurs; Perepodgotovka; Women's Liberal Fund; Women's Alliance; Innovation Fund; Businesswomen's Club (Ivanovo); Klub Zhenskaia Initsiativa (Cheboksary); Urals Association of Women (Ekaterinburg); Confederation of Businesswomen of Russia (Ekaterinburg)
For women as mothers	Tolko Mamy; Committee of Single-Parent Families (Ivanovo); Committee of Multi-Child Families (Ivanovo)
For families and children	Committee of Soldiers' Mothers; Association of Russian Women Mothers; Preobrazhenie; Society "Women of Presnia"
Charity	Association of University Women (Chuvash branch); Cheboksary city <i>zhensovet</i> ; Chuvash republic <i>zhensovet</i> ; City Union of Women (Ivanovo); Committee of Single-Parent Families (Ivanovo); Committee Multi-Child Families (Ivanovo); Congress of Soviet Women; Women's Alliance; URW; Society "Women of Presnia"
For lesbians	MOLLI
Consulting and advice for women	Cheboksary city <i>zhensovet</i> ; Chuvash republic <i>zhensovet</i> ; City Union of Women (Ivanovo); Committee of Single-Parent Families (Ivanovo); Women's Liberal Fund; SANTA; Center for Women's Initiatives
Consciousness-raising	
Groups	Feminist Alternative; Klub Garmonii
Lectures	Preobrazhenie; Klub F-1

Table 1 (*contd*)

Specific focus	Names of groups (Moscow-based unless otherwise noted)
Societal	Association of Women Journalists; Feminist Orientation Center; Association “Women and Development”; Dzhenklub
	Anti-violence against women
	“Sisters” Rape Crisis Center; Moscow Crisis Center for Women
	Culture
	Salam Bi (Cheboksary)
	Publishing
	Moscow Center for Gender Studies; Petersburg Center for Gender Issues; Inform Center of the IWF; Archive–Database–Library project; Preobrazhenie; Center for Women’s Initiatives

state nor want to influence the state (such influence falls outside the scope of their organizational goals). Falling into this category are several self-help and mutual support organizations: the Ivanovo Center for Social Support of Women and Families, the Moscow-based Association of Women [Film and Theater] Directors, the Center for Women’s Initiatives, the single-mothers’ association Tolko Mamy (Only Moms), SANTA (for women in law enforcement), and the lesbian support group, MOLLI. Likewise, the anti-violence groups (e.g., the Moscow Crisis Center for Women and “Sisters” Rape Crisis Center) were not seeking influence over the state; they, like several of the consciousness-raising organizations (Klub Garmoniia, the Feminist Orientation Center) and the mutual support groups, were more interested in individual work with women than with policy change.

Viewed from the other side, however, 75 percent of the organizations interviewed (across the cities) posited influencing the state in some way as a goal. This shared emphasis on influencing the state (whether to alter policies, or to obtain resources such as office space or funding for job-training programs) may be due to the state’s historical monopoly and top-down distribution of resources. The concentration of resources and control over their distribution by the state continues to a certain extent today, especially with regard to obtaining office space and the granting of privileges to nonprofit organizations.

On the third dimension, historical affiliation with the Soviet party-state, considerably more subjectivity enters the picture. The Union of Russia’s Women (URW), having stemmed from the Soviet Women’s

Committee, was thereby formerly linked to the Soviet party-state, as were the many *zhensovety* across the country. Currently, however, they are no longer “official” state bodies. Although the categories are no longer objectively descriptive, terms like “independent women’s movement” have been appropriated by the groups in the IWF and Women’s League, and modifiers like “official” and “nomenklatura” (elite–bureaucratic) are still applied to the state-derived groups like the URW and the *zhensovety*. Most of the women’s movement organizations today have a large stake in not being perceived as “state” or coopted bodies, which makes the use of these terms contested and complex.

On the registration dimension, the organizations vary widely. A number of organizations remain unregistered for various reasons.<sup>34</sup> Some are based in academic institutes, and have not restructured themselves as independent nonprofit organizations. Others are denied registration because of homophobic discrimination (e.g., MOLL). Some groups have no need of registration in order to conduct their activities (the consciousness-raising group Klub F-1, for example), or cannot afford the costs. For those organizations that are registered, registration includes the following categories: those that registered under the auspices of another organization previously registered (and thus could engage in transactions through that organization), labeled “within another organization”; those registered at the municipal level; at the regional level (either at the *oblast* (provincial) level or at the republic level, in the case of several groups in Chuvashiia, which is a constituent republic of the Russian Federation); the interregional level (a category created for organizations having an insufficient number of branches throughout Russia to qualify as a national or “all-Russian” organization); the national (“all-Russian”) level; and the “international” level (organizations with branches abroad, or which are joint Russian–foreign organizations). Tables 4 and 5 in the appendix (pp. 273 and 275) provide specific information on organizations’ dates of formation and/or registration, as well as registration level.

The size of the organizations in my sample varied widely, from a handful of members to several thousand across Russia. Table 6, in the appendix (p. 277), lists the organizations by the size of their memberships (individuals) and by city. A number of the organizations had collective as well as individual members. The collective members are in some cases women’s businesses, enterprises, and other women’s

<sup>34</sup> In my sample, of fifty organizations in four cities (Cheboksary, Ekaterinburg, Ivanovo, Moscow), thirty-nine were registered; and eight were unregistered. The status of the remaining three could not be ascertained.

organizations. The larger organizations are most often Russia-wide, or “interregional.” As one would expect, the consciousness-raising groups are relatively small, as are the groups in Cheboksary and Ivanovo (compared to those based in Moscow, several of which are organizations with multiple branches in other cities). Some of the organizations (especially those based in academic institutes) do not have members as such; in those cases the staff members serve as the organization’s activists and leaders.

In some instances, the label “membership organization” does not entirely capture the nature of the groups in question. Women’s councils (*zhensoveti*), for example, although they have members (and usually a core subset make up a presidium), do not seem to devote energy to recruiting many more members. Indeed, with exceptions, most of the smaller organizations (100 individual members or fewer) interviewed appeared to have attained a comfortable size; it seemed from interviews and participant observation that outreach to new members was not high on their organizational agenda. In general, the group leaders did not tend overall to maintain precise data about their organizations’ membership; many informants guessed as to the size of the membership, or presented a range in which they believed the membership size fell. The very fact that leaders were not fastidious about keeping membership data only emphasizes the point that membership outreach was not, on average, a priority of these women’s movement groups.

### **Activists**

The leaders of these organizations constituted a diverse collection of women. By profession, the largest number of group leaders (twenty) were involved somehow in academia, either in research or teaching. The second biggest group (sixteen) comprised women whose main form of work (whether paid or unpaid) was leadership of their women’s group (or work as part of its staff). Eight activists worked in radio, publishing, or journalism; four in the creative arts; five for parliamentary deputies or for analytical centers affiliated with the parliament; two were in law. One activist was an engineer, another worked for the Ministry of the Interior, and one had set up a business in the private sector. This distribution of occupations suggests that, on the whole, the activists were trained in highly skilled jobs that required a good deal of facility in self-expression.

The activists, many of whom were working full-time in addition to pursuing their activism, also had families and children. Of sixty-six activists for whom data was available on this question, 85 percent had at