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# Feminism and Soviet Society

Tatyana Mamonova, a woman forced to leave the Soviet Union in 1980 for her involvement in a Leningrad feminist group, discussed the problems of Soviet women at a Harriman Institute lunch seminar September 28, 1989. She praised the new "progressive openness of society and its willingness to recognize flaws" as inspiring hope for change in the lives of Soviet women, especially since feminists there are no longer persecuted by the authorities.

After the Russian Revolution, Mamonova pointed out, "women retained all of their nineteenth-century obligations and took on the new, Soviet ones." Despite official legal equality, women remain subordinate to this day. Virtually all Soviet women have jobs and do all of the housework. Men feel no sense of duty to help out with shopping, standing in lines, preparing meals from scratch, and taking care of children. Mamonova mocked the poet Andrei Voznesensky, whose "progressive" views include his opinion that "it would be more fair, of course, if each woman's work was cut by two hours a day to give them enough time for their domestic chores."

## The Worst Jobs

Women are expected to have low aspirations and be resigned to taking the worst-paid jobs, the ones which men actively avoid. These are typically in the health and education sectors. Some people are now suggesting that Soviet women, given the chance, would abandon the frustrations of the workplace for the comforts of family life. Yet Mamonova pointed to a recent survey showing that only twenty percent of women would do this. The independence and satisfaction of a profession, however limited, are in the long run preferable to staying at home.

Some women are in fact choosing to leave the home rather than the workplace, deciding to live alone in the face of the irresponsibility of Soviet men. Alcoholism is rampant among men and is a leading factor in half of all divorces. Because men do not help take care of children, many women refuse to have more than one child.

Men do not take responsibility for pregnancy despite the rise of pre-marital sex, so twenty-seven percent of pregnancies are aborted and fourteen percent lead to births by unwed mothers — many of them teenage girls who are shunned by society. Mamonova claimed that only one-third of pregnancies are now conceived in wedlock. Pervasive fatherlessness (*bezottsovshchina*, a term which arose out of the tragedies of World War II) is making a comeback.

## Attacking Pornography

Although she is generally positive about the changes under Gorbachev, Mamonova brought attention to the "darker side" of *glasnost*. While such issues as rape, homosexuality, drugs and the spread of AIDS can now be discussed candidly and in a serious manner, the new openness is also fostering an explosion of "pornography" and of violence towards women. Rape is up thirty-five percent over the last two years, although part of this figure is certainly due to increased reporting of what is less and less a taboo subject.

Mamonova complained of obscene language and bare bodies in theaters, rock lyrics which denigrate women, and the general phenomenon of "mediocrity trying to pass itself off as high class," that is, selling bad taste in the guise of boldness. Referring to the female star of the hit movie *Little Vera*, Mamanova sardonically observed, "*Playboy* welcomed the 'emancipation' of Natalia Negoda" when she posed for the magazine last spring. "It seems," she concluded, "that freedom needs a balance."

Americans in the audience compared her complaint to that of some American feminists who advocate eliminating pornography. Mamonova stated that she also would ban pornography because it is really violence, but not erotica, which is about love. When pressed about the problems of enforcing such distinctions, she asked, "You can't tell the difference between violence and love?"

Mamonova cited the rock band Zvuki Mu, which recently released an album on a western label, as a particularly troubling example of the new licentiousness. She pointed

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to the song "Zero Minus One," in which the male singer tells a girl how little she means to him, as being symptomatic of the group's "macho sexual anxiety." A young Soviet man in the audience, though, contended that the band's lyrics mock base-level attitudes.

Another contemporary problem is that of the nationalities conflicts, which Mamonova worries will cause setbacks for women. Rising ethnic tensions are giving strength to patriarchal religions, which historically have forced women into subordinate roles. A similar phenomenon is occurring in Poland, where the Catholic Church is trying to use its influence with Solidarity to curtail the availability of contraceptives and abortion.

## *Perestroika* and Women

In response to an assertion that *perestroika* might actually hurt women, Mamonova countered that it "gives women opportunity and hope." Women respond to Gorbachev "positively, better than do men." Gorbachev's understanding of women's issues is not entirely clear, though — he once spoke of making it possible for women to return to "their womanly place."

As evidenced by recent conferences and the formation of new associations of professional women, some Soviet women are using the reform atmosphere to mobilize for further advances in their status. Notable are the Union of Women Cinematographers, the Council of Women Writers (formed as a branch of the Union of Writers), and professional associations of women physicians, journalists and scientists. Women are also getting involved very actively and in equal numbers to men in the ecology and peace movements.

This new flurry of activity by professional women will help raise the level of consciousness of women, which peaked in 1917 and was a major force behind the revolution. "The Bolsheviks tried to be pro-women, but were in fact sexist," a pattern that has continued in Soviet institutions since that time.

The mass media, like other Soviet institutions, is controlled by men. Mamonova believes that the battle for sexual equality can be successfully conducted through the media, however, by turning the tables and using the Soviet regime's own avowed views on equality as ammunition. She predicts a long, slow fight, but hopes that Soviet women can turn "equal rights on paper" into equal rights in reality.

*Reported by Jeff Zelkowitz*



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