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**EVOLUTION AND MOBILIZATION OF RUSSIAN WOMEN
ENGAGEMENT IN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
AND ASSOCIATIONS**

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Abstract

The paper considers changes and mobilization of women engagement in non-governmental organizations and associations (NGOs). Engagement of women in non-governmental organizations allows the latter to participate actively in public policy. In Russia, the problem is not so much the quantitative presence of women in power structures as absenteeism and deficiency of women engagement. Various development stages of women's NGOs relate to meeting key women interests and their consciousness politicization. At a pre-revolutionary stage, interests of women were focused on professional employment, economic independence, on the access to higher education. The Soviet period was characterized by etacratic conditions where women's NGOs acted as a form of ideological work and political mobilization. Interests of women as a social group were never considered separately; hence women tried to solve problems of their social role (family and childcare, daily routine, etc.). The Post-Soviet period is characterized by a spate of women's NGOs where ideas of equality, political and social reforms are brought to the forefront. Political consciousness of women changes under altered social philosophy. By the late 1990s, positive anticipations had been replaced with apathy and estrangement. The decline in the social and economic status of many Russian families made women's NGOs to reject personal political interests, and focus rather on protection of disadvantaged groups. At present, women's NGOs act as a mouthpiece of various social groups and solve a wide range of issues. Non-governmental organizations face a number of difficulties, including organizational difficulties, underestimation of the need for political involvement, weak resourcing.

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Keywords: Political consciousness, gender, political involvement, political activity, etacratic conditions.



1. Introduction

Issues of gender equality remain relevant in modern democracy being perceived as “inclusive” or “consolidated” democracy. In Russia, the problem is not so much the minor physical presence of women in power structures as the deficiency of women engagement as such. This, in turn, is bound to sociocultural and historical (in Russia, the women’s issues were always raised but were never solved separately) traditions.

Literature sources refer to the concept of the “women’s power”, which consider the impact of women on political decisions and political events, their role in the economy and public life, their influence on formation and promotion of cultural stereotypes (including through personal creative output), as well as peculiar features of the so-called women’s networks of influence. Hardly ever, having formal authority women had real effective channels of informal influence: through marriages they established new family relations; through exchange of information and circulation of rumors they formed public opinion; through patronizing they helped or interfered with the political career of men; through participation in disorders and revolts they checked official authorities for strength, etc. (Repina, 2000, pp. 124). Explanations concerning a relatively weak participation of women in public affairs do not anymore stay within the opposition system differentiating between “men’s” (activity, intelligence, ambition) and “women’s” (passivity, emotionality, care). There is obviously a need to reconsider new social practices of women engagement in public policy and policy decisions.

Non-governmental organizations are entities uniting interests of an individual, groups and other associations of people thus providing them an opportunity to influence public life in general. They take the role of the link between the main systems and institutes of civil society: foster dialogue between authorities and society, between large social groups and microassociations.

The attitude of a society to such associations has changed. According to the survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), since 2007 the percentage of Russians with clear attitude towards public organizations has increased in the society. Thus, in 2014 more than half of respondents considered that public organizations protect human rights and promote public initiatives (56% against 35% in 2007). According to 55% of respondents, such organizations assist urgent social issues (31% in 2007). It is noteworthy that from 2007 to 2014 the percentage of respondents considering that public organizations exercise independent control over public authorities (from 21% to 40%) increased twice (Whether the society needs ...).

With the growth of public activity more favorable opportunities are created for women’s NGOs. Unlike public policy where public governance is mainly administered by men, women play leading roles in many non-governmental organizations and even chair them.

Women’s NGOs are a part of civil society thus allowing women actively participating in social, political problems, protecting personal interests, taking the initiative and influencing decision-making. At the same time, such NGOs serve as a tool to change political consciousness of women.

Considering historical development of Russian women’s NGOs, the American researcher L. Sandstorm divides them into two groups. One group includes traditional organizations which are mainly involved in charity campaigns. Frequently, such groups are politically dependent and avoid tensions

within the society. Another group covers feministic organizations which insist on societal change, but are too isolated from the general public (Sundstrom, 2002, pp. 215-217).

Domestic study offers various reasons for the typology of women's NGOs (Ayvazova, 2009; Pushkareva & Pushkareva, 2017; Yukina, 2007) where organizations are divided into those adhering to a traditional model of gender relations and those opposing it. The variety of classifications of women's NGOs is characterized by distinction of interests, social composition, and work methods. At present, such organizations are very proactive in protecting interests of different population groups (often vulnerable groups, for example, children), dealing with problems of cultural, spiritual and moral development, issues of science and education, civil society, etc. At the same time, there is a need to analyze shift of interests and mobilization in women's NGOs.

2. Problem Statement

Women's NGOs have changed, following the shift of women interests, their behavior, and political consciousness. The paper deals with a number of corresponding tasks. The first one is to describe stages of development of women's NGOs; the second one is to study various forms of participation and involvement of women in public associations; and the third one is to analyze the content of women interests implemented by NGOs.

3. Research Questions

The solution of tasks is related to a number of research issues considered in this paper. In particular, how key interests of women were solved at various stages of women's NGOs development. To what extent do women's NGOs serve a mouthpiece of public/personal interests? What role do opinions/actions of women's NGOs play in governmental decisions? Do they influence the policy towards women and their status in the society? What is the current state and potential of women's NGOs?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to analyze evolutionary changes of women interests and opportunities of their mobilization in non-governmental organizations and associations.

5. Research Methods

The methodological framework of this paper covers the study of the Soviet gender system (Zdravomyslova, 2003; Pushkareva, 2012; Sillaste, 2012; Temkina, 2007), the modern gender system of a society (Connell, 2015), women's movement (Yukina, 2007; Ayvazova, 2009; Altemerova, 2015), public and political consciousness (Lapin, 1997; Levada, 1997; Toshchenko, 2004). A series of interviews with members of women's NGOs (n=24) held by the author in 2015-2017 and the secondary analysis of data form the basis of the study.

6. Findings

The evolution of women's NGOs dates back to such associations as the Society of providing low-income apartments and other benefits to low-income population of St. Petersburg, the Society of financial help to the poorest population, the Society of women labor (1859-1861) established by "feminist triumvirates" M. Trubnikova, N. Stasova, A. Filosofova. Broad philanthropic and educational activity of these societies has eventually formed the demand of women's NGOs of that time: to provide women with opportunities of professional employment, and hence of economic independence and access to higher education (Yukina, 2007).

The Soviet period of women's movement, which is linked to the pivotal role of Marxist ideology and etocratic conditions, includes several stages.

First stage. Politicization of women through protection of their interests (1918 – beginning of the 1930s). Inclusion of women into political movement as an integral part of labor movement and as one of its main driving forces. "Women's departments" (Zhenotdel) were established in October, 1919, in all Communist Party organizations; a special government to work with women – "Women's Institute" – was also formed. I.F. Armande (fall of 1919) was the first head of the Women's department, after her death this role was taken by A.M. Kollontay (Staits, 2004).

The declaration of protection of women interests as an important part of the state policy has, undoubtedly, benefited the attitude of female citizens to party actions. Remaining in their majority as non-party members, they gradually began to demonstrate loyalty to authorities. The process of women mobilization was declared as the solution of "women's issues", but the mobilized women were still unable to exert dominant influence on political decisions.

Second stage. Women interests were replaced with state interests (1930s – mid 1950s). In the early 1930s, the Bolshevik Party needed independent women's organizations ever less, and the women's department lost its initial authority and power. Political affairs among women were managed by women's departments at local party committees. It was completely bound to the general issues of the state and the party, while women interests were gradually neglected. Among them, there was the movement for women to master male professions imposed "from above" (tractor drivers, airwomen, drivers of public transport). This was the period of active engagement of the Soviet women into the international anti-fascist women's movement, which was founded at the beginning of the 1930s in countries dominated by the Nazi regime (Pushkareva, 2012).

Third stage. Engagement of women in public affairs, partial recovery of their role (mid 1950s – end of 1980s). This was the period of major changes in gender policy, partial recovery of private life, formation of discourses opposing the official policy. In the late 1950s, republican, city and regional women's councils were established throughout the country upon the initiative of the Committee of Soviet Women. Their tasks and objectives were similar to those of the women's departments, i.e. engagement of women in labor and public affairs, massive awareness-building campaigns, participation in the international women's movement, etc. The Committee of Soviet Women thoroughly managed their performance. However, the scope of activity of the Committee of Soviet Women was far beyond the fight against fascism and management of women's councils. In the post-war period, the democratic women's movement was widely spread around the world. It should be noted that the Committee of Soviet Women

(entirely controlled by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR) was the only organization where women were able to display their active attitude; however, this committee was not independent. The revival of the independent women's movement in Russia only began in the late 1970s (Zdravomyslova, 2003).

The fourth stage began in the period of political and economic reforms in the late 1980s when the country faced a significant shift in the role of the state in terms of social relationship in general and gender issues in particular.

Thus, the Perestroika period (1985 - 1991) was characterized by the emergence and massive mobilization of social movements, massive public support of democratic reformations in the country. Perestroika processes demanded active engagement of women. Using the past experience of women's councils, women actively joined the public work. They arranged public reception offices in situ, where members of the women's council held office hours for the public to render the necessary assistance to women. Off-site meetings of women's councils held at enterprises with its administration present were particularly popular. Among others, such meetings covered the issues of working conditions for women, general conditions of medical and childcare facilities, communal services and amenities. Household patrolling made it possible for women's councils to better understand women needs and provide the necessary assistance. The issue of family social passports was another task of women's councils. It allowed identifying disadvantaged families, families where a woman is the only breadwinner, understanding the needs of large families, and patronizing lonely elderly people.

The nationwide stage of women's movement development in the Russian Federation began in 1991. The first independent women's forum, which took place in 1991 in Dubna, united 48 women's NGOs. In 1992, after the voluntary dissolution of the Committee of Soviet Women, all women-related affairs were managed by the Women's Union of Russia, which until now remains the largest women's NGO uniting women's councils, unions, associations, committees and clubs from almost all regions of the country (Pushkareva & Pushkareva, 2017).

The process of political mobilization of women faced the imperfection of the legislation (which nobody was willing to change), exclusiveness of administrative and managerial men structures, and at the same time weakness of public organizations advocating political interests of women. However, the level of women politicization increased due to aggravating tensions and conflicts among nationalities, anti-military attitudes among women and so on. At the same time, women's councils were perceived as the party and nomenclature system, and hence women had to join various social movements and organizations: ecological, cultural, educational, entertaining, etc. There were entirely women organizations created during that period.

The period of economic reforms (1992 - 1995) was characterized by the slowdown of mobilization, a decrease in political engagement and credibility to political power.

Euphoria of the Perestroika period, which made the population of the country expect fast and, by all means, positive social and economic changes, was replaced by apathy and estrangement. It was mainly the reason of sharp aggravation of the social and economic situation in Russia, decline in the majority of Russian families that were simply put in conditions of physical survival. Employment of women in

production and their engagement in family and household affairs increased a lot thus leaving no time and efforts for social and political activity.

When comparing surveys conducted in 1990, 1992, 1994, G.G. Silaste notes that the process of women politicization, which started during the Perestroika period, was replaced by disappointment over the policy by the end of 1991, and later by breakdown of confidence in all parties. At the same time, nearly a third of respondents opposed political isolation of women, considering that women have to take an active role in public life in those forms suggested by society and without demonstrating interests as a single social community (Sillaste, 2012, pp. 359-372).

By 1998, the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation registered more than 600 women's NGOs, most of them established in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other large cities. The core focus of such women's NGOs during the Post-Soviet period were the protection of women rights in labor market, support and professional retraining of unemployed women, involvement of women in business, mutual support and interaction of soldiers' mothers with authorities, unification of women according to professional interests, assistance to abused women, support for families with disabled children, public awareness campaigns on gender equality, etc.

The analysis of modern women's NGOs shows that the focus of their actions is similar to the 1990s-2000s. Quite a few associations have regional networks. This includes the all-Russian public organization Business Women of Russia, which unites women engaged in state professional organizations and in business; the All-Russian organization Women of Russia, which declares support for women in disadvantaged situations and interacts with authorities; the Federation of Women with University Background, which unites women working in education, culture, medicine and other social fields; the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, which ensures legal support to army draftees and military officers; the Creative Union of Women Artists of Russia, etc.

The list of NGOs is reasonably large, but at the same time, data on their activity are rather incomplete. As for the activity of such organizations, there is a clear shift of gender roles from the private to public area. The official policy directly or indirectly appeals to the revival of traditional gender roles and of the "natural" function of women and men. After outstanding participation of women in the public policy of the 1990s, there is a falling back to traditional women roles. At the same time, political mobilization of women in modern conditions is mainly seen during election campaigns as means of female electorate attraction.

It should be mentioned that at present NGOs are imposed advanced requirements in terms of socio-political relations. According to Milovanova, respondents suggest the following problems which are to be solved by women's NGOs: access to education (including preschool education) and vocational training; housing initiatives (homeowners associations, control of utility rates, fight against infill construction and densification, etc.); charity; engagement of women in policy and public administration, etc. (Milovanova, 2013, pp. 104-105). Gnedash A.A. analyzed initiatives within online-platform designed by authorities for the legislative civic initiatives "Russian public initiative" marked as "women's issues" (motherhood, childhood, etc.). She notes their low support and explains that it is caused by no recognition of relevant problems by the majority and organizational difficulties (population does not know, does not trust such problem solving mechanism) (Gnedash, 2013, pp. 90-92).

Women's NGOs face a variety of problems. Thus, the study of women's NGOs showed that there is no complete information on NGOs, there is no source of uniform reliable data. NGOs act separately, even without understanding the activity of each other, which deprives them of possibility to unite their efforts and direct them to solve mutual problems.

Some NGOs are established "in hot pursuit" of some event and due to desperate situation of certain civic groups and infringement of their rights. The impossibility to defend their interests forces such groups to feel vulnerable and useless and thus makes them even more desperate, repentant and skeptical, especially with regard to support and cooperation from authorities. Hence, such NGOs become temporary and unsustainable.

Women's NGOs face opportunistic attitude of authorities, for example pre-election campaign, government relations, PR campaigns ("As elections begin, many people are willing to give an interview or film a story" (Interview, 2015-2017)). Lack of mechanisms of collaboration of power with women's NGOs makes it complicated for initiatives to be promoted, personal interests to be defended, and independence to be supported. Lack of sustainable sources of financing also makes women's NGOs dependent.

Organizational weakness of NGOs and underestimation of the need of political involvement to solve gender problems also restrict independence within socio-political interaction ("The majority of club members are working women, which do not always have time for meetings", "So, we had to re-elect the chairman this year and nobody agreed. This was only because they feel that this is not really relevant to anybody. That's all" (Interview, 2015-2017)).

There is a certain inertia concerning NGOs, and women's NGOs in particular, due to developed stereotypes, stigmatization of women's political engagement and influence on decision-making process ("Well, simply because mass media describe it this way", "They only say and write that miner's families live perfectly and in clover" (Interview, 2015-2017)).

Researchers note that the following features are typical for modern women's movements:

Dissociation. The movement is mainly presented by small, weakly interacting groups. The organizations are not informed enough on the activity of their colleagues.

Multipolarity. Some women's NGOs believe that their task is to ensure gender equality, while the others strive for greater support from the state and distribution of roles within a family and the state.

Generation isolation. The movement is evidently "getting older", the recruitment of new supporters and employees is almost impossible.

A low level of influence on decision-making. Certain experts rather than organizations have influence on decision-making and only within limits where authorities admit so.

Domination of the theoretical approach to the analysis and solution of social problems. The reason for this is development of "correct" decisions, but not the social base of the movement.

A low level of influence on public opinion. The society is even less receptive to activists and experts from the women's movement than to authorities. Even within the human rights context, there is no clear understanding of problems that women's movements face (Mikhalev, 2010).

Women's NGOs often act as a mouthpiece of disadvantaged groups and minorities, which makes them a link between the power and the population. They contribute to micropolicy implementation within

regional socio-political interaction. The present study shows that women, having united in organizations or movements, begin to realize common and specific social interests (Altemerova, 2015, pp. 304-324). Thus, it may be concluded that the potential capacity and the role of women's NGOs in modern socio-political and economic conditions is underestimated.

7. Conclusion

The evolution of women's NGOs is caused by the dynamics of women interests: from the right for higher education and professional activity (as an interest of a social group) to protection of private rights: problems of violence, motherhood (as a public interest). It should be noted that at present, there is not enough influence of women's NGOs on political decisions. This is caused by a number of circumstances. First, a narrow support base, "elitism" of women's movement, separation and at the same time, incorporation of NGOs in government institutions, which does not make them subjects, but objects of the political process. Second, there is underestimation of the need of political engagement of women, wide distribution of sexist prejudices. Third, women's NGOs are not engaged in strategic coalitions both within women's organizations and with other social and political forces, including parties, labor unions, etc. Another serious obstacle is the lack of material resources. Nevertheless, women's NGOs give an opportunity to women to participate in the solution of a wide range of social problems, give them a chance to play a role in public policy, power structures.

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