INTRODUCTION

When speaking of the situation of women in the Russian Federation, many scholars and politicians are forced to describe it as paradoxical. After undergoing a rapid phase of the emancipation of women in the 1920s, which included the legalization of civil marriages and abortions, only one decade later, in the late 1930s, Russia rapidly slid back into a rigid patriarchal system. Throughout the 20th century, Russian women were forced repeatedly to take on altered roles and statuses, ranging from those of the emancipated woman worker freed of household duties to those of a sexualized object required to bear children and take care of husband, family. These contradictory roles resulted in a set of diverse and sometimes mutually incompatible demands that were placed on women by the society and the state.

There is no definition of discrimination against women in the constitution of the Russian Federation. The constitution declares the principle of equality of the sexes, but it does not contain a clear prohibition of sex-based discrimination. The relevant UN Committee [CEDAW] has recommended that Russia adopt separate legislation that would ensure effective measures in combating discrimination against women. Nevertheless, the State Duma has failed to adopt any of the bills concerning protection by the state of equal rights and freedoms or equal opportunities for representatives of both sexes.

To this day, the scope for free choice of occupation or type of work is still restricted for women in the Russia Federation, despite a number of remarks issued by the UN on the topic. The list of occupations in which it is illegal to employ women comprises more than 450 occupations. Moreover, there is no guarantee of equal opportunities for men and women to advance to higher positions or to receive equal pay for equal work.

More than ever, Russian women are viewed as sexual objects. That objectification and the habit of regarding women as men’s property can be seen as root causes of phenomena like domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and verbal abuse. As a rule, these crimes are not openly acknowledged and are not investigated. In Russia, there is still no specific law addressing domestic violence committed against women, nor is domestic violence classified as a criminal offense. Only coercion to sexual intercourse is considered a criminal offense, and it is therefore the only sex-related crime. Other forms of sexual harassment are not penalized. There is no definition of “harassment” to be found in Russian legislation. The involvement of women and girls in prostitution and international trafficking has become a mass phenomenon.

The increasing role of the clergy in the state administration is cause for serious concern. The so-called “spiritual renaissance” that was declared as a new “national idea” at the end of the 1990s has lead in practice to a renaissance of conservative religions at their worst, resulting in psychological and physical violence against women (even murder) on religious grounds.
Thus, in Chechnya, women who fail to dress in accordance with the rules of *Sharia* are being shot at with automatic paintball guns. In Ingushetia, Dagestan and Karachayevo-Cherkessia there are reports of murders of women committed “for the sake of honor”. Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church conduct intensive PR campaigns propagating ideas of the “natural vocation” of women and discrediting the concept of equal rights. Leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church have called for legislation that would subject women who have had an abortion to the punishment that applies for murder; they have issued public statements placing the responsibility for having been raped on the women, explaining that the acts of the perpetrators as due to the “indecent” appearance of the victims of that violence.

In the Russian Federation, women must bear a double burden, doing unpaid labor in the home and raising children, and performing a paid day job. The worst off in today’s Russia are single mothers with minor children. Sociologists and economists speak of an increasing feminization of poverty: the birth of the first child causes a decrease in the standard of living of 30%, the birth of a second child one of 60%.

In order to put a stop to these negative trends, the public discussion of the situation of women has to be changed to reflect the realities in Russia. Antidiscrimination legislation must be adopted, and it must be appropriately enforced. A feminist agenda has to be set up in society, and the progressive women’s movement has to be revived.

The 21st century has shown that the rights and freedoms won in a difficult social and political fight are once again in danger and that any social changes grow into the notorious “women’s issue”. Now is the right time for action!

Through interviews and a brief illustrated report, we present the positions and points of view of various women scholars, politicians and activists on the issues specific to the contemporary situation of Russian women.

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