

# Reviewing the Changing Situation of Women in Russian Society

Written by Nicola-Ann Hardwick

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NICOLA-ANN HARDWICK, DEC 20 2014

*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*  
– Simone de Beauvoir

Throughout history, the role of women in society has repeatedly varied according to political conditions and discourse, for the purpose of serving the interests of those in power. Contemporary Russia is hardly an exception to this general tendency. Putin's paternalistic leadership celebrates concepts such as virility, strength and power. The Russian President has enjoyed great popularity through the successful marketing of his sex appeal, as well as the more recent image as a caring father of the Russian nation. At the same time, recent Russian political narratives have increasingly depicted the role of women as belonging to the domestic sphere, especially in the context of the very low birth rates of the last two decades. Women's rights in Russia have been further repressed by Putin's authoritarian regime through restrictions to the abortion law, increased governmental control and cuts in funding of women's crisis centres following new NGO laws, and a general distrust of the term "feminism," which has had a negative connotation in Russia ever since the Brezhnev era or even earlier. As the protection of women's rights weakens and the authoritarian grasp tightens in Russia, resistance to heteronormativity and neo-conservative gender rules has become more difficult, but arguably also more necessary than ever before.

In drawing upon academic literature, this paper attempts to explore critically the situation of women in Russia. It argues that womanhood and feminism are social constructs, which have been primarily determined by Russia's elites and patriarchs throughout the country's history. Therefore, these terms must be explained within the context of the Russian experience of emancipation. To this end, the paper begins with an historical survey of the notions of Russian womanhood and feminism from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the late Soviet era. The following section focuses on the tumultuous transition period and brief moment of sexual revolution and liberation in the 1990s, when discourse about sex, sexuality and gender was opened. Thirdly, gender roles in Putin's Russia are discussed, examining contemporary narratives of masculinity and virility, as well as various policies directed at Russia's "women question." Finally, the paper considers forms of resistance to Putin's gendered regime, and provides an analysis of Pussy Riot's performance and influence regarding the promotion of women's rights and feminism in Russia.

### **A Brief History of the Role of Women in Russia until the end of the USSR**

As one observer states, "[f]eminism and women's movements in Russia have been conditioned by the historically specific circumstances which influenced Russian society in every sphere." [1] Indeed, the concept of womanhood in Russia has evolved considerably over time. Russian feminism was born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century due to a loosening of restrictions regarding the education and personal freedom of women enforced by Peter the Great, who was influenced by Western Enlightenment and the significant role of women in the French Revolution as symbols of liberty and democracy. [2] Some aristocratic women even rose to very powerful positions, most notably of all, Catherine the Great. Others entered the sphere of literature and became authors and poets. [3] Nonetheless, in feudal Russia, only a very small percentage of women – only aristocratic women – were privileged enough to benefit from these early feminisms; and even in aristocratic circles, the role of women in pre-revolutionary Russia remained extremely restricted. Feminist themes were addressed by the works of some of the post prominent intellectual figures in the

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country at the turn of the nineteenth century including Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, portraying the institution of marriage as a form of enforced prostitution and slavery of women.[4] In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russian feminism began to reach the working classes and the peasants, leading to the creation of socialist all-women unions for female factory workers, who felt their cause had been neglected by male socialists.[5] From 1907-1917, the League for Women's Equal Rights was Russia's most influential feminist organisation, calling for women's education and social welfare, as well as equal rights, such as suffrage, inheritance, and passport restrictions.[6] The October Revolution in 1917 vastly increased the membership of this movement and women were granted the right to vote in the same year. In fact, Russia was the first major world power to do this, although the effects thereof were limited, given that it had become a one-party state.

The role of women changed dramatically under the Soviet Union. The articulated aims of the Soviet government after the revolution were the creation of a communist state, socialist society and Soviet citizens to be implemented by a proletarian dictatorship (see Section 1 of the USSR Constitution of 1924).[7] According to Marxist-Leninist ideology, all forms of inequality would be erased through the abolition of class structures and the shaping of an egalitarian society based on the fair distribution of resources among its people.[8] Lenin held that in order to achieve effectively the emancipation of women, "it is necessary to be socialized and for women to participate in common productive labor. Then woman will be the equal of man." [9] The communist's monopoly of power meant that many independent women's associations could no longer survive.[10] In 1920, a lack of access to contraceptive methods and the need for women in the labour force, led to the legalization of abortion. However, under Stalin, abortion was prohibited again from 1936 to increase the birth rate until its reintroduction under Khrushchev in 1955 to prevent the many female deaths caused by illegal and unsafe abortions.[11] Other Soviet policies included generous maternity leave and a nation-wide network of child-care centres.

Yet, although the equal rights of women were recognised by the Soviet "Stalin Constitution" of 1936 (Articles 122 and 137), the real picture was rather different. Women were necessary in order to achieve the Soviet goal of a single class of workers and peasants. To achieve this end, the state required women as workers and thus enabled them access to education, a career, and legal guarantees of equality. Women were, in fact, encouraged to complete their studies and professional training, and to become scientists, doctors, engineers, journalists or even truck drivers and construction workers.[12] Compared to many Western societies, this was a significant achievement. Nevertheless, women were discouraged from attaining high-ranking economic and political leadership positions; they were paid less and there were no reliable means of protection for those women who suffered sexual harassment on the workplace.[13] Moreover, women were expected to serve a dual role in both the professional and the domestic spheres. A popular ruse among Soviet women was,

Under capitalism, women are not liberated because they have no opportunity to work. They have to stay at home, go shopping, do the cooking, keep house and take care of the children. But under socialism, women are liberated. They have the opportunity to work all day and then go home, go shopping, do the cooking, keep house and take care of the children.[14]

As Smith points out, for many Soviet women, therefore, the dream was not to be forced to take on this double hat of responsibility and simply to stay at home.[15] In essence, "Soviet women's emancipation declared the achievement of women's equality and never realised it." [16] The state chose largely to ignore the major obstacles that women faced in their day-to-day lives. In fact, sometimes the roles it chose to enforce on women were rather contradictory: whilst the state had created the image of women labourers, women were also constructed as innately compassionate and caring, and stapled "abnormal," if they behaved assertively or strove for higher positions in politics or business. During the 1970's "masculinized" women were blamed for rising male hooliganism and alcoholism.[17]

Despite these inequalities, there was no phenomenon similar to American feminist movements in the USSR. The state controlled the "women's question" through certain "women's sectors" in local party structures, tasked with organising activities following instructions from the capital.[18] In the 1970s, a form of underground Soviet feminism developed, which was quite different from that in the West, primarily because it was based on the experience of Soviet women. The focus of gender equality was less on treating men and women as the same, but stressed perceived inherent gender differences. This strand of feminism believed that the "feminine" must be highly valued

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and emphasised that the liberation of women in the USSR depended on the recognition that official declarations were far off the mark in the way they depicted women's lives.[19] Religious arguments that claimed women had a feminine soul "capable of love and spiritual experience" were also widespread.[20] This position was possibly derived from Russia's early feminists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who argued that love and religion could free the oppression of patriarchy. Assuming "obedience and humility," this view was a safer option for women in a totalitarian state.[21] The general consensus is that the movement arose due to the rising economic inequality experienced at the time. Many women were imprisoned or exiled from the USSR. Suppressed by the KGB, radical dissident feminism only reappeared in the mid-1980s, when Russian feminists gradually made more "Westernised" and political demands, adhering to new principles such as democracy and individuality.

## Women during Russia's Transition Period

During the period of Glasnost and Perestroika, the underground movement was mobilised. This meant that many women's organisations were able to act openly and many such independent institutions were funded from abroad. The notions of sex, sexuality and individualism that had been repressed in Soviet society could be discussed publicly and the exchange with foreign researchers and activists was enabled. Awareness about gender inequalities in the USSR including job discrimination, the exclusion of women from decision-making levels, the double hat of paid and domestic work, as well as patriarchal societal and family structures, was increased.[22] The hope of a shift towards "liberal" democracy in Russia further encouraged the formation of new political and civil society groups, such as the political party Women of Russia, gender research groups, and non-governmental organisations.[23]

Liberal hopes of democracy and Westernised feminism were soon to wane. The Russian state's transformation led to immense national and class inequality, developments that went hand in hand with changes in views on gender towards a traditional patriarchal society.[24] Political activity declined during a period of political demobilisation until 1995 and many women's organisations were either marginalised or institutionalised by the government by integrating them into other pre-existing organisations. At the same time, there was a trend towards patriarchy, which disregarded gender research in politics. Another problem was that women's movements in Russia had no common position but were rather heterogeneous in their views, weakening their presence.[25] Whilst the Russian Constitution of 1993 still guarantees formal equality between men and women (Article 19.3), neo-traditional gendered political discourses have flourished, once again considerably disadvantaging women's rights.[26] Indeed, Mikhail Gorbachev was a strong advocate of "ridding women of their double burden" by letting them return to domestic work, their "natural domain." [27]

Russia's transition period from communism to a new regime was fundamentally linked to gender. In the tumultuous Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras, women faced a myriad of challenges, some of them, once again, rather paradoxical. On the one hand, the policies of glasnost and perestroika led to a belated sexual revolution in Russia.[28] This had discursive, as well as legal and social effects, raising hopes of feminist groups. Moreover, male homosexuality was decriminalized in 1993 and a new criminal code in 1997 redefined rape and the age of consent.[29] Yet, the developments in the early 1990s soon also revealed that the narrative on sex and gender roles would remain in the state's control. With the upsurge in rampant consumerism, the post-Soviet market has objectified women "as trophies and servants to men." [30] Political discourses reconstructed the role of women as belonging to the domestic sphere, feminism continued to be linked with negative connotations such as ugliness, hatred of men, and lesbianism (as it had been since the Brezhnev period), and women's organizations received little grassroots support.[31] Unemployment and poverty figures were much higher among women than among men.[32] In effect, the liberalization of Russia fostered a patriarchal, neotraditional conception of gender relations, re-empowering men in the public sphere and pushing the role of women into the background.[33]

## The Situation of Women in Putin's Russia

These post-Soviet trends regarding the objectification and regression of the role and status of women have been continued and deepened since Vladimir Putin's rise to power. Putin has very successfully strengthened the pre-existing paternalist structures of Russian society, and has taken them to another level. In fact, Putin has gone beyond mere politics and become somewhat of a "cult figure" in Russia. Francisco Martinez very interestingly analyses

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Putin's regime according to Michel Foucault's concept of biopower.[34] The latter distinguishes between sovereign and governmental power and theorizes two different "games" of power relations, the "shepherd/flock game" based on the notion of Christian *agape* love (relating to governmental power), which by definition is limitless, and the "city/citizen game" of the Greek polis (in connection with sovereign power that is based on limits of a social contract, i.e. power of the sovereign, freedom of the subjects, etc.). Putin has shown tactical genius at merging these two "games"; the notions of the sovereign ruler and the caring father over many years. To this end, as Beth Holmgren argues, he has managed to combine "misogynistic posturing (the coarse talk and body display of the he-man) with sentimental paternalism (the protective, pious modern father and husband)."[35]

Putin's rhetoric has legitimised a crude, vulgar form of public discourse based on "private, male-only locker room talk", the language of police comrades, military and intelligence agencies – the *siloviki*. [36] After the sinking of the Kursk submarine in 2000, he labelled some wives, who were agitated about a state rescue operation "whores;" a few years later, he praised Moshe Katsav, the former Israeli President, now convicted of rape, for his "sexual prowess." [37] In 2009, Putin's party created the following metaphor for Russia's modernization process: "I saved a girl from being raped. I just persuaded her." [38] At the same time, Putin has cultivated an image of heterosexual macho sex appeal through photo ops featuring his judo-toned muscles whilst swimming and horse riding (half-naked), arm-wrestling, hunting, motorbiking, or positioning a collar on a sedated polar bear – Putin was even nominated as the country's sex symbol. [39] To put it in feminist terms, "Putin is using his own brand of masculinity to embolden the national psychology and to legitimate more muscular intervention in all aspects of peoples' lives." [40]

Putinism has strengthened the situation of men in elite and professional positions. Women, on the other hand, continue to face institutionalised gender bias. Putin's archetype of the "new Russian man" assumes heteronormativity, as well as notions of intrinsic gender difference, depicting "men as protectors" and "women as needing protection." [41] Putin announced 2008 as the "Year of the Family," and declared June 8, as the "Day of Family, Love, and Fidelity," a new national holiday, reinforcing views of men as the responsible heads of family. [42] A public health campaign in Moscow also encouraged men to be "better fathers," involved in their family and living healthily. [43] Such policies have also promoted Putin's image as a "caring father." Putin has pushed back the brief sexual liberalization period of the early 1990s – especially in the light of Russia's low birth rate – in order to promote traditional conservative family values. An emphasis has been placed on women as holding a duty to the Russian nation as child-bearers. This focus has been bolstered by pronatalist policies such as increasing benefits like maternity leave and making available "maternity capital" (of around \$12,000 in 2012) for women who have a second or third child to help finance mortgages, children's education, and subsidizing pensions. [44] These initiatives have been strongly supported by Orthodox Christian nationalism, and have been framed through neoliberal individualism and the language of self-help. [45] A survey shows that whilst 51 percent of men believe that the husband should be "the head of the family," only 19 percent of women agree with this statement. [46]

Since the 1990s, Russian nationalists have labelled abortion and contraceptive methods as "insidious practices contributing to the nation's low fertility and rapidly decreasing population" – a phenomenon they termed "Russia's demographic catastrophe." [47] In fact, abortion has been framed as a Western ruse to stimulate further population decline in Russia and has accordingly been construed as a national security issue. [48] These views have received vigorous support from the Orthodox Church, which perceives abortion as murder, penalized by a ten-year period of excommunication. [49] As a result, Russia's abortion rate has declined significantly from 100 per 1,000 women of reproductive age in 1991 to 44.1 in 2005. [50] In 2011, draft legislation was introduced to the Russian Parliament to require women to receive written permission from their husbands, or in the case of minors from their parents or guardians, in order to have an abortion. [51] The bill also proposed a mandatory ultrasound, so that women getting an abortion would hear their fetus's heartbeat (which might change their minds about the abortion, or at least make them feel more guilty), as well as the prohibition of second-trimester abortion, except if the pregnancy was conceived due to rape. [52] Current estimates show that the abortion rate at 60 percent of the total number of pregnancies in Russia and the death rate in connection with abortions, are alarmingly high compared to developed countries. [53] Therefore, changes to Russia's abortion laws are in order. However, these recent developments have not really addressed the underlying issues pertaining to the dangers for women who have an abortion in Russia. Rather, they simply further curtail women's rights without dealing with the actual causes of the high abortion rate or the possible side effects, such as an increase in even more dangerous illegal abortions.

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The public discourse drawing upon traditionally gendered power networks and the role of women in the family and the domestic sphere has, of course, impeded women from attaining leadership positions, whether in business, politics, or in the Orthodox Church. More than in the West, leadership positions in Russia have been “tainted as morally compromised and inevitably corrupting” ever since the Soviet era.[54] In the Soviet frame of mind, leadership neither signals virtue nor notable accomplishment. As Michele Rivkin-Fish writes, “[e]ven articulating notions of autonomy and a concept of women’s interests unrelated to their role as mothers requires immense courage.”[55] Therefore, many women in Russia may choose to occupy positions behind the scenes, to make “more pragmatic contributions, to retain a sense of the godness of their labour, and to avoid the public stigmatization of female “abnormality”.”[56] However, a recent survey tellingly shows that most women yearn for paid employment, but about half of the male respondents said that they would not like their wives to work and that women should not be entitled to paid employment.[57] Nadieszda Kizenko outlines how women are attracted to the Orthodox Church, as it offers alternative (non-Western) beliefs and notions of how to live, including spiritual exploration and the conservation of Russian religious tradition.[58] Another interesting study is provided by Andrea Mazzarino, who focuses on the alternative identities of successful Russian businesswomen and how many Russian female entrepreneurs struggle to compete against widespread beliefs of “socially appropriate” behaviour of women in a domain generally construed as male.[59] Her research reflects the insufficient opportunities for women to have a stark and direct impact on Russian welfare policies, the media, or enforcement of discrimination policies within companies.

Similarly, Russia lacks a generally accepted movement lobbying for women’s rights, for many of the same reasons as why women are not perceived as fit for leadership positions. Since the early 1990s, there has been a small, dedicated group of scholars in the field of gender studies at Russian universities.[60] However, whilst their work is surely very important, their reach is rather limited. The political party Women of Russia has seen little success since the early 1990s, also because it was not well-endowed and most members were more interested in using their mandates to ensure their own job stability rather than actively promoting women’s rights.[61] The most powerful women’s organisation in Russia is currently the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia, which, like many well-renowned female Russian public figures derives much of its popularity from traditional, conservative notions of women as “society’s caretakers” and “inherently altruistic.”[62] The most influential women, who remain independent of the state, include female media pundits, journalists, and literary intellectuals, such as Liudmila Ulitskaya.[63] The Association of Women Journalists created by the feminist journalist Nadezda Azhgikhina, is especially noteworthy, regarding the high percentage of female journalists in Russia. Increasingly, women journalists have been targeted for their indefatigable efforts to report on such issues as human rights and Chechnya, including the assassinations of journalist Anna Politkovskaja (2006) and human rights advocate Natalia Estemirova (2009) (after they proved embarrassing to the Kremlin).[64] Other prominent women in Russia include Yevgeniya Chirikova, a Russian environmental activist and a leading figure during the pre-election protests of 2011/2012, as well as Kseniya Sobchak, a journalist and “It girl” (sometimes dubbed “Russia’s Paris Hilton”), who has also protested the alleged electoral fraud by Putin’s party, both of whom have been subject to intimidation due to their political activism and opposition to Putin.

As Amrita Basu notes, “women’s movements are less likely to emerge when states are weak and repressive and there is a chasm between official pronouncements and actual politics and practices.”[65] In 2006, a new NGO law strengthened the Justice Ministry’s powers to monitor organizations perceived as opposing Putin, controlling a sphere largely influenced by professional women.[66] The term “feminist” had already long been resented by Russian authorities, however, the new restrictions created additional hurdles for women’s rights movements, such as a requirement for NGOs to report foreign funding. At the same time, the right to public protest and independence of the media were also curtailed. Furthermore, a presidential decree in 2008 removed tax-exempt status of ninety percent of foreign NGOs and foundations working in Russia, particularly those with a focus on human rights.[67] In 2012, further restrictive legislation was passed, obliging NGOs funded by foreign organisations to register as “foreign agents.”[68] Putin’s new social contract is based on a system of “rewards for behaviour prioritized by the state,” essentially increasing wealth and improving funding social services in exchange for political support.[69] There is evidence of a retrenchment of women’s crisis centres, which have existed in Russia since the 1990s, providing services such as hotline- or in-person consultation to survivors of gender violence and/or raising awareness of violence against women. Johnson and Saarinsen’s research in this field has shown a decrease in the numbers of women’s crisis centres, most probably due to a plunge in budgets, and a shift towards advocacy services,

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awareness campaigns (often with a focus on violence in the family rather than explicitly against women) and politicization – they have been “eticized and domesticated ... and much of feminism has been lost”.[70] Nevertheless, according to surveys, it appears that most of those who work in crisis centres remain committed to the promotion of women’s rights.[71] As a result of the considerable restrictions on Russia’s civil society, many women’s organizations use doublespeak, referring to feminist terms only when addressing Western audiences, and more general human or women’s rights language when engaging with Russian audiences.[72]

In essence, Russia’s shift towards authoritarianism has been a “gender regime change,” establishing a new gender order throughout the constitutive structures of society, including demographics, income, education, as well as political, economic, and social relations.[73] Whilst the role of women in society, has continuously changed throughout Russia’s history, according to the political diction of the times, the perception of male gender roles has not been transformed, but rather elevated to an even higher status than before.[74] It is nevertheless important to put these developments into context. Russia has remained an innately patriarchal society and the transition period brought with it the objectification of women; however, it also replaced an economy that fundamentally disregarded many of women’s aspirations and needs. Thus, for example, liberalisation made available many household and body care items that would save women a lot of domestic labour and give them a little self-indulgence. Many women also openly embraced their new market power and turned to matchmaking and surrogate agencies in search of a better life.[75] Nevertheless, the current state of women’s rights and opportunities in Russia remains unacceptable.

## Forms of Resistance and New Directions for Feminism in Russia

Radical feminism, once briefly experienced in Russia during its transition period after the demise of the Soviet Union, as well as other, “softer” forms of feminism, such as women’s rights movements, have been rather successfully repressed through neo-paternalistic discourse implemented by Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and nowadays, Putin. Indeed, under Putin, Russia’s distaste for feminism has steadily grown, pushing women into more traditional roles such as motherhood and the family caretaker. In a survey of the year 2000, only 49.5% of women stated that men and women should have an equal role in society.[76] Some women, who were familiar with the dual responsibilities of women during the Soviet era to balance professional and domestic life, actually welcomed these changes. Others, conditioned by the Soviet legacy to pay little attention to official rhetoric, as the government never adequately represented their needs, have simply adapted to these new times. During the Soviet Union people,

did not counter official culture, but played another game: they produced parallel culture within official order. And they simulated support for official ideology by ‘pretense misrecognition’ of the gap between genuine parallel and false official meanings, therefore, the Power was domesticated not by ridicule but by transforming it into an ignorable backdrop for the parallel event.[77]

In an ongoing negotiation between Soviet and post-Soviet norms, many women have prioritised their concerns, often choosing social and economic welfare over struggles for civil and political rights.[78] As Mary Buckley notes, “[o]ne senses that in Russia today there is a fashion in social science to classify as a ‘feminist approach’ what in fact may not be quite so, and then to go on and argue against it in order to knock it down as groundless.”[79] However, by far not all women (or men) are willing to agree tacitly to Putin’s degrading policies. In fact, in a survey conducted in the year 2000, over half of both women and men expressed their opinion that women who would like to should participate in and shape the running of the country.[80] Resistance to Russia’s patriarchy has also been demonstrated in recent mass protests on the occasion of the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011/2012.[81] Moreover, much furore was caused by the feminist rock collective Pussy Riot’s anti-Putin performance of a “punk prayer” in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, February 2012.

The significance of Pussy Riot deserves some further elaboration. The five women wearing brightly coloured outfits and balaclavas covering their faces, challenged the Virgin Mary to “become a feminist, become a feminist, become a feminist” and dismount Putin from power.[82] On August 17 of the same year, three of the five members of Pussy Riot were convicted of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred,” receiving a two-year sentence in a Russian penal colony.[83] In fact, their acts were denounced as a “mortal sin” and a “war on Orthodox people” by the Church.[84] As one observer notes, their performance was probably not “the most tactful way to attract a broad spectrum of

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supporters to the opposition's views.”[85] Nonetheless, it must have taken a lot of courage for the young women to do what they did. The members of Pussy Riot, who also participated in the December 2011 pre-election protests, are, in fact, well-read in feminist literature and have been influenced by prominent feminist theorists such as Judith Butler. They have publicly framed Putin's regime as patriarchal oppression and have stated in interviews that “there's a deep tradition in Russia of gender and revolution – we have had amazing women revolutionaries.”[86] Whether or not their performance was tasteful, Pussy Riot succeeded in the second wave feminist maxim of making the personal political and bringing the plight of Russian women to global attention.[87] Russia's opposition movement's de facto leader, Alexei Navalny, expressed his distaste for the presentation, but still called for the women to be released, describing the arrests as “senseless and horrible cruelty, which is much worse than their very stupid but small offense.”[88] Nonetheless, the Pussy Riot trial opened discussions on women's rights, and state and Church corruption in Russia. The Russian state and media constructed Pussy Riot as deviant, based on a view of female protestors as “unruly and disruptive femininity, which made a spectacle of itself in public space and therefore violated norms of womanhood as passive and private.”[89] Russian public opinion of Pussy Riot was reportedly negative, as many felt offended or even outraged, thus creating a narrative of female deviance. However, the form of deviance constructed by the West was rather one of Russia as the authoritarian and repressive “Other,” very much recalling a Cold War narrative, in which the West stands for freedom and democracy.[90]

As Martinez points out in his analysis of Putin's biopower, the combination of love and fear is not ever-lasting; the *agape* love of the citizens towards Putin has steadily declined, demonstrating a more critical stance towards politics in Russian society.[91] This has led to increased conservatism in Putin's recent policies, a *mélange* of chauvinism and “religious-mystical rhetoric, traditionalism, isolationism and a conviction that the interests of the state should take priority over the interests of the individual.”[92] In this respect, love for Putin in Russia has evolved into something more close to pornography: “an expropriation of the potentiality for change, a surplus reality without content, and an ubiquitous visibility that communicates but does not care.”[93] This calls for new modes of resistance in Russia. Pussy Riot has certainly made a significant contribution in this regard. Since Maria Alyokhina's and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova's release due to Putin's “amnesty” in December 2013, the young women have vowed to continue fighting for women's rights.[94] Alyokhina has stated, “[w]e will be creating very special, colourful and powerful programmes to defend other innocent women in Russian prisons, who are being turned into slaves right now,” whilst Tolokonnikova has said that “Russia is built along the same lines as a prison camp at the moment, so it's important to change the prison camps so that we can start to change Russia. Everything is just starting, so fasten your seat belts.”[95] Martinez explains that a Foucauldian strategy of resistance to biopower requires an attitude of indifference with regard to power, the refusal of care in the sense of not submitting to the temptations of possessing power or being cared for by it. Such a form of “carelessness” and “the profane potential of bare life” has been demonstrated by groups such as Pussy Riot and Voina (a provocative and politically-charged Russian street-art group), a phallus drawn on a bridge in St. Petersburg and an organized orgy at the Museum of Natural Science in Moscow. As Foucault argued, human life can never be fully integrated into the structures that govern it and it constantly resists forms of domination.[96] Thus, whilst, “women's organizing in Russia – particularly on a feminist basis – faces serious obstacles in the foreseeable future”,[97] there remain some ways in which women can stand up for their rights. Not all calls for women's rights and feminism need to be as radical as those of groups like Pussy Riot. Female academics, businesswomen, crisis centre workers, and other women in positions of influence all have a special responsibility to share their knowledge and promote the empowerment of women in their own ways, which can have a considerable impact on women's lives, for ultimately resistance begins with the shaping of one's self, which women can only do effectively when they are aware of their own rights. As the Russian feminist Olga Voronina argues, “[g]ender discrimination is a systemic sociological phenomenon, and it can only be overcome by society as a whole.”[98] In the first instance, however, this process requires a bottom-up approach, in which individuals become aware of the issue and learn to raise their voices and claim their rights.

## Conclusion

In essence, innate gender differences between men and women have always been an underlying assumption of Russian society. Despite early notions of feminism in 18<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia, and the proclaimed equality of woman and man since the Soviet Union, women have never effectively enjoyed the same rights as their male counterparts. Indeed, based on conceptions of natural gender differences, and the legal equality between men and

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women, as well as the perception that women should be part of the workforce, but nonetheless responsible for household chores, the role of women in the USSR was fundamentally paradoxical, and perhaps unachievable in reality. Nevertheless, Soviet women were offered access to education and jobs, albeit rarely in leadership circles. The fall of the USSR, is often associated with the objectification of Russian women, although it also opened opportunities for women's movements and feminist groups, which had been prohibited under communism. Sadly, few of the women's groups formed in the early 1990s have been very successful. Instead of moving towards liberal democracy, Russia has once again turned to authoritarianism, yet, this time combined with rampant consumerism. The new Russia was more or less divided amongst a group of old cronies, who subsequently became multi-millionaires, forming a new oligarch class. Putinism has reinforced the patriarchal structures of the country, through gender normative policies celebrating manhood and denigrating women as mere childbearers, mothers and housewives. Thus, Putin's regime has been built upon and fostered by a gendered understanding of society that fundamentally represses women's rights and disdains feminism. This is not to say that women do not have any opportunity to become involved in sectors such as politics and business, indeed there are some very prominent women in these spheres (a few have been mentioned above), but rather that the public discourse on family roles discourages women from doing so, creating a social environment that is not conducive to gender equality.

In Putin's Russia, women are fundamentally portrayed as "lesser human" than men and many women do not even realise that this could and should be different, for Russian society has always been rather conservative in this respect, even if communist propaganda created an illusion of fairness. Of course, worldwide Russia is no exception in this regard, but the increasing repression of women in recent years is real reason for concern. Resistance to Putin's regime is very difficult and inherently dangerous, as the example of Pussy Riot has shown. Yet, it is crucial to continue raising awareness about women's rights in Russia. Here, it has been briefly suggested that resistance begins with the construction of one's self, which requires awareness of human and specifically women's rights. Future studies should focus on exploring in-depth ways in which women can resist Putin's masculinized authoritarianism, such as self-realisation. Further studies could also concentrate on how foreign support for women's rights and feminism in Russia could be increased and made more effective.

## Notes

[1] Alexander Kondakov, "An essay on feminist thinking in Russia: to be born a feminist," *Oñati Socio-legal Series* 2(7) (2012): 35.

[2] Edith Saurer, Margareth Lanzinger, and Elisabeth Frysak, *Women's Movements: Networks and Debates in Post-communist Countries in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Köln, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2006), 365.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Amy Mandelker, *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 6.

[5] Rose L. Glickman, *Russian Factory Women: Workplace and Society, 1880–1914*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 243.

[6] Norma C. Noonan and Carol Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 38-40.

[7] Kondakov, 35.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Hedrick Smith, *The Russians* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), 166.

[10] Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality & Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905–1917*



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(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 235.

[11] Michele Rivkin-Fish, "Conceptualizing Feminist Strategies for Russian Reproductive Politics: Abortion, Motherhood, and Family Support after Socialism," *Signs* 38(3) (2013): 572.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Beth Holmgren, "Toward an Understanding of Gendered Agency in Contemporary Russia," *Signs* 38(3) (2013): 536.

[14] Hedrick Smith, *The New Russians* (Random House, 1991), 183.

[15] Holmgren, 536.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid: 537.

[18] Kondakov, 36.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Yaroskenko 2011 cited in Kondakov, 36.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid: 37.

[23] Janet Elise Johnson and Aino Saarinen, "Twenty-First Century Feminisms under Repression: Gender Regime Change and the Women's Crisis Center Movement in Russia," *Signs* 38(3) (2013): 545.

[24] Gapova 2005 in Kondakov, 37.

[25] See Johnson and Saarinen.

[26] Kondakov, 38.

[27] Holmgren, 537.

[28] Francisco Martinez, "The Erotic Biopower of Putinism: From Glamour to Pornography," *Laboratorium. Russian Review of Social Research* 3 (2012): 113-114.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Holmgren, 538.

[31] Vicki L. Hesli et al., "The Gender Divide in Russian Politics," *Women & Politics* 22(2) (2001): 42.

[32] Ibid: 42.

[33] Peggy Watson, "Eastern Europe's Silent Revolution: Gender," *Sociology* 27(3) (1993): 471-87.

[34] Martinez: 110.

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[35] Ibid: 537. See also Helena Goscilo, ed., *Putin as a Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, (London: Routledge, 2012).

[36] This new crudeness is also a consequence of Putin's promotion of so many *silovki* under his rule. Johnson and Saarinen: 547-548.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Quoted in Ibid.

[39] Martinez, 118.

[40] Johnson and Saarinen, 2013 548.

[41] Ibid: 549.

[42] Sara Rhodin, "A Holiday From Russia With Love," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/09/world/europe/09russia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/09/world/europe/09russia.html?_r=0).

[43] Ibid.

[44] Johnson and Saarinen, 547.

[45] Michele Rivkin-Fish, "Pronatalism, Gender Politics, and the Renewal of Family Support in Russia: Toward a Feminist Anthropology of 'Maternity Capital'," *Slavic Review* 69(3) (2010): 702.

[46] Anne White, "Gender Roles in Contemporary Russia: Attitudes and Expectations among Women Students," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57(3) (2005): 432.

[47] Rivkin-Fish: 573.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Nadieszda Kizenko, "Feminized Patriarchy? Orthodoxy and Gender in Post Soviet Russia," *Signs* 38(3): 598.

[50] Sakevich, 2007 cited in Rivkin-Fish, 2013, 573.

[51] Rivkin-Fish, 2013, 573.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Kizenko, 598.

[54] Holmgren, 539.

[55] Michele Rivkin-Fish, "Representing What Women Want," (paper presented at the Russian Futures: Contexts, Challenges, Trends conference, Duke University, Durham, NC, February 21, 2010).

[56] Ibid.

[57] White: 432.

[58] Kizenko.

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[59] Andrea Mazzarino, "Entrepreneurial Women and the Business of Self-Development in Global Russia," *Signs* 38(3) (2013): 623.

[60] Holmgren, 539.

[61] Hesli et al., 69-70.

[62] Holmgren, 540.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Of course, many male journalists have also been persecuted in Russia in recent years.

[65] Amrita Basu, ed., *Women's Movements in the Global Era: The Power of Local Feminisms* (Boulder: Westview, 2010), 13.

[66] Johnson and Saarinen, 2013, 544.

[67] Robert W. Orttung, "Russia", Freedom House, Nations in Transit, 2009, accessed January 7, 2014, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/nit/2009/Russia-final.pdf>.

[68] Johnson and Saarinen, 2013, 562.

[69] Cook, 2011 cited in Janet Elise Johnson and Aino Saarinen, "Assessing civil society in Putin's Russia: The plight of women's crisis centers," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 44 (2011): 42.

[70] Johnson and Saarinen, 2013, 561; 2011, 49.

[71] Ibid, 2013.

[72] Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, "Women's NGOs in Russia: Struggling from the Margins," *Demokratizatsiya* 10(2) (2002): 237-38.

[73] Johnson and Saarinen, 2013, 550.

[74] See Barbara Evans Clements et al., *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

[75] Holmgren, 538.

[76] Hesli et al., 49.

[77] Alexei Yurchak and Dominic Boyer, "American Stio: Or, What Late-Socialism Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West," *Cultural Anthropology* 25(2) (2010): 211.

[78] Vikki Turbine, "Locating Women's Human Rights in Post-Soviet Provincial Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64(10) (2012): 1847-1869.

[79] Mary Buckley, "The Politics Surrounding Gender Issues and Domestic Violence in Russia: What is to Be Done, By Whom and How?," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 26(3): 443.

[80] Hesli et al., 49.

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[81] Holmgren: 537.

[82] Free Pussy Riot! Lyrics of songs of pussy riot, accessed January 7, 2014, <http://www.freepussyriot.org/content/lyrics-songs-pussy-riot>.

[83] Lizzie Seal, "Pussy Riot and feminist cultural criminology: a new 'Femininity in Dissent'?", *Contemporary Justice Review* 16(2) (2013): 293.

[84] Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Free Pussy Riot," *The Nation*, May 2, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/167647/free-pussy-riot#> and Valeria Costa-Kostritsky, "Is feminism in Russia a mortal sin?," *New Statesman*, August 16, 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/08/feminism-russia-mortal-sin>.

[85] vanden Heuvel.

[86] Seal, 294.

[87] Free Pussy Riot! "The 6th letter from detention by Nadia written on the eve of the verdict," accessed January 7, 2014 <http://www.freepussyriot.org/content/6th-letter-detention-nadia-written-eve-verdict>.

[88] See Katrina vanden Heuvel; Valeria Costa-Kostritsky.

[89] Seal, 294.

[90] Ibid: 299.

[91] Martinez: 117.

[92] Mikhail Kochkin, "The Birth Pangs of Russian Conservatism," *Russia and Eurasia Review* 2(6) (2003), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=28401](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=28401)).

[93] Martinez, 118.

[94] The third young Pussy Riot member, who received a prison sentence was released and put on probation in October 2012.

[95] Shaun Walker, "Freed Pussy Riot members say prison was time of 'endless humiliations'," *The Guardian*, December 23, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/23/freed-pussy-riot-amnesty-prison-putin-humiliation>.

[96] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990).

[97] Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, "Russian Women's Activism: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back," in *Women's Movements in a Global Era*, ed. Amrita Basu (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 253.

[98] Natalie Bitten, "About gender censorship and the term feminism in Russia - Interview with Olga Voronina," *Gunder Werner Institute: Feminism and Gender Democracy*, accessed January 7, 2014, <http://www.gwi-boell.de/web/democracy-100-years-womens-day-voronina-russia-3123.html>.

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