



**Universitat**  
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## **MASTER'S THESIS**

# **EVOLUTION OF GENDER ROLES AND FEMINISM IN RUSSIA, A HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION**

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**Master's Degree in Human Cognition and Evolution**

**Centre for Postgraduate Studies**

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## **1. Abstract:**

Feminism, or rather anti-feminism is a popular theme in Russian media and politics today. The feminist movement is being described as a “war to men” and even a threat to the Russian national values (Voronina, 2009). Strong binary gender roles have always been present in the Russian society and have been strengthened substantially by Vladimir Putin’s conservative politics, particularly after his second presidential term. Gender norms have been used in order to defend Russian nationalism, via ideas about femininity and masculinity (Sperling, 2015). One of the reasons for a strong rejection of feminism in Russia is a form of back-lash against the Communist past (Occhipinti, 1996), even though, as I would like to discuss in my thesis, real equality was never achieved in the USSR, and despite some great advances for women in the 1920’s, the conditions offered by Marxism-Leninism to achieve equality were not enough (Scott, 1982). I suggest that an analysis of the Soviet problematic of gender roles and inequalities considering the Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017) would shed light on this issue. I would like to analyse the evolution of the Women Movement in Russia, starting from its beginnings in 1860’s (the so-called “Woman question”) influenced by a liberalization of the Russian society of the time as a result a crisis of the traditional Russian society in a specific socio-economic context (Yukina, 2007), followed by the development of women groups and their first demands (access to education). I would also like to consider the role of women in the Russian Revolution and stress the importance of such prominent figures as Alexandra Kollontai, Nadezhda Krupskaya and Inessa Armand in the achievement of many rights for women after the revolution and during the 1920’s, as well as the fundamental ideas of those years that acknowledged that the liberation of women could not come with women’s participation in the workforce alone (Buckley, 1985). I would like to analyse the important role of the Zhenotdels (Women’s departments), and the influence that they had on the emancipation of Soviet women (Kameneva,

2014). Unfortunately, these great debates were ignored later on, and many of the rights obtained after the Revolution were taken away during the Stalin years, when the main objective was Collectivization and women's issues came off the agenda (Buckley, 1985). A revival of the Feminist movement took place in the late 70's with a samizdat (self-published) magazine created by a group of young feminists from Leningrad. Although their revindications were quite different from their Western counterparts, they have had a certain impact amongst other Russian dissidents of that time and have continued their work after being expelled of the USSR (Holt, 1985). As a conclusion, I would like to analyse the role of Russian women today, how gender is constructed in the Russian society and how it is paired with a totalitarian conservative regime in order to continue to maintain strong inequalities in the Russian society.

## 2. Introduction

I have chosen the theme of Feminism in Russia as it is a topic that I would like to address in more detail in the future in my Doctoral Thesis.

Various social-learning theory studies demonstrate that the human identity, and therefore gender, is socially constructed. The social-learning theory stresses the importance of the cultural and environmental influences in the development of sex-roles (Attwood, 1990). Albert Bandura (1977), one of the main exponents of the social-learning theory argued that: "from a social learning perspective, human nature is characterized as a vast potentiality that can be fashioned by direct and vicarious experience into a variety of forms within biological limits." (Bandura, 1977). Gender conceptions are constructed from a mix of experiences and operate together with motivational and self-regulatory mechanisms to guide the gender-linked conduct of people throughout their life (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The authors of the socio-cognitive theory of the development of gender argue that gender development is promoted by three major modes of influence (through a process of cognition), these modes are : modelling (imitating models of the subjects immediate environment), enactive experience (discerning gender-linkage of conduct in relationship with the results and reactions to one's actions) and influence through direct tuition (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Gender is therefore socially constructed in a way that depends on the culture a person lives in, as men and women may be pressured to alter their behaviour in order to adhere to cultural norms and avoid disapproval and rejection (Bem, 1984). Sex-role differentiation due to the socially constructed gender has been historically criticized by feminist movements worldwide. Indeed, it is seen as a hierarchy that places women in subordinate positions and maintains women's inequality determining it by upbringing (Attwood, 1990). This has led most feminists to argue that the establishment of real equality between men and women requires the abolition of culturally determined differences , and only then will people fulfil their potential as individuals (Attwood, 1990).

The oppression of women is therefore built upon socially constructed characteristics, often considered as “natural” and inalienable. Judith Lorber (1991) argues that gender is a social institution, and that it is a process of creating social statuses that are distinguishable for the assignments of roles and responsibilities; these statuses are furthermore ranked unequally and gender is therefore a major building block in social structures built on these inequalities (Lorber, 1991). Gender roles therefore function as a stratification system, in order to rank men above women of the same rank and class (Lorber, 1991).

Gender roles can vary greatly in different cultures, and anthropologists such as Margaret Mead have demonstrated that qualities seen in the Western society as intrinsically “feminine”, or “masculine” are socially constructed and are by far not the general norm in other cultures. Even though Mead did not criticize directly the patriarchy and the gender roles that it fosters, in *Sex and Temperament* she argues that we will only be able to understand and talk intelligibly about “sex” differences when we will understand in detail the way in which society can mold all men and women born within it to approximate an ideal behaviour specific to each gender (Mead, 1935).

Pseudo-scientific theories about the “natural” differences between men and women have been present in the Western society since Darwin, who was convinced that the mental difference between the “strong” and the “weak” sex were natural and explained the submission of females to males (Garcia Dauder & Perez Sedenó, 2017). Russia was not an exception and throughout history gender has had a high importance in the Russian society. The role of women has constantly evolved throughout its history, from Tsarist Russia, throughout the Revolution and the years of the Soviet Union and until today. In this thesis I would like to analyse the evolution of the role of women and feminism in Russia from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when the first feminist movements had appeared, until modern times, in order to understand how and via which mechanisms gender affects society and subsequently generates the oppression of women.

### **3. The birth of the feminism movement in Tsarist Russia**

The authoritarian state presided by the Tsar in Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had retarded and inhibited the feminist movement compared to the rest of Europe (Evans, 2013). The claims of some scholars that women in Russia possessed more rights than their counterparts in the rest of Europe in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century are not convincing as they derive from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of Russian society and politics of this period of time (Evans, 2013) and a modern revival for the fashion of “traditional” Russian values due to a rejection to all that Soviet and a longing for the monarchist pre-revolutionary past in the Russian society. In fact, under the Tsar, Russia was an authoritarian police state with no independent institutions and in which opposition to the Tsar’s regime was considered as treason and was punishable by death (Evans, 2013).

The role of women in Tsarist Russia was therefore not only controlled by societal notions of “womanly” behaviour prohibiting women any activity in the public sphere, but also by official legislative limitations (Yukina, 2007). These included for example the law preventing women of under 21 years of age to live independently without the permission of her father or spouse, restraining also their mobility (a husband could officially claim for his wife to be returned to him if she had left), the difficulties of divorce due to the fact that marriage was regulated exclusively by the church and that the only justifiable reasons for it were meant to be proven in court and therefore were extremely humiliating, the written authorization from a male family member for women who wanted to study or work as well as the fact that a woman had to be married in order to be able to obtain a part of her heritage, as only this permitted her to improve her social status and obtain a certain form of “independence” (Yukina, 2007).

The social and political changes in Russia in the 1850’s and 1860’s (due to the reforms undertaken by the new Tsar Alexander II such as the abolition of

serfdom in 1861) (Evans, 2013) were a fertile ground for the appearance of new social movements. The nobility class (“*Dvoryanstvo*”) was losing its power and economical status and a process of progressive removal of the nobles from main political and economic roles in the society, as well as the resources, had begun (Yukina, 2007). In the 1860’s the class of the “*intelligentsia*” incorporated in its ranks members of this new Russian society. Lenin had described this as the “appearance of the *commoner*, the main mass activist of the liberation movement in general and the democratic uncensored press in particular” (Lenin, 1935). The so-called commoners were convinced democrats, due to their more social experience than the noble class. Their main characteristics can be defined as a critical view of the Russian realities, the refusal of social injustices and the demand of changes (Yukina, 2007).

The initial expression of feminism in Russia, was, as elsewhere, literary (Evans, 2013), and the new term of the “Women question” had started to appear in written press and in social debates. Even though the first mentions of feminism and women emancipation were made by anarchists like M. Bakunin, who demanded a full political and social equality between men and women and the abolition of marriage (Polischuk, 2012) the apogee of the Women Question took place in the 1860’s when male authors of articles and pamphlets published their work in popular newspapers in order to discuss and defend women emancipation. They include the author of the feminist manifesto M. Mikhailov, the defender of female education N. Pirogov and the author N. Chernyshevsky with his famous novel *Chto delat’?* (“What is to be done?”) where he describes emancipation as a process necessary for both women and men and advocates for a change of relations between the sexes, an equal division of labour and the creation of partnership, equality and mutual trust and respect as bases for a new society (Ayvazova, 1995). The Russian society was therefore taking a new turn, and the concept of women emancipation and equal rights arose from this new class of citizens demanding changes in the society.

Women, in addition to the necessity to oppose the legal and societal injustices committed towards them mentioned earlier, were increasingly willing to be able to enter social life, and by doing this to develop their own identity by helping the society (Yukina, 2007). The social basis of the participants that formed the first feminist movement in Russia were women issued from nobility who had faced the problem of subsisting after the reforms, due to lack of revenue and the impossibility to gain independency; these “New Women” had the advantage of education, free time and some economical possibilities in order to organize the women’s movement (Yukina, 2014). The first leaders of the movement were Maria Trubnikova, Anna Filosofova and Nadezhda Stasova. All three were from wealthy backgrounds and had devoted themselves, starting from the 1860’s to the foundation of various philanthropic organizations specifically aimed on helping women (Evans, 2013). As in the West, because the leaders of this theoretical feminism in Russia were issued from an impoverished nobility, they have been defined by some scholars as liberal feminists (Jelnikova, 2003). Nevertheless, in this period, they did not associate themselves with the western term of “feminists” using instead the Russian word “*Ravnopravki*” (egalitarians) and considered the women’s question and the importance of equal rights for women as a main topic of the general Russian politics (Yukina, 2007).

The work of these first feminists was at the beginning mostly, as stated earlier, philanthropic and educative, and they did not employ any radical measures in order to fight for equality at the beginning of their activity. The reasons for this was the lack of a middle class in Russia and an impossibility for legal political activity for men and women alike (Evans, 2013) which made them equal in their lack of rights. Despite the creation of girls schools in the 1850’s and the access to university this was followed by new restrictions when in 1862 women were expelled from universities by order of the government and, by consequence, a great number of women started to seek education abroad (Evans, 2013). Richard J. Evans (2013) states that Russian women were applying to universities all over Europe, and that in 1873 there were 100 women studying at

the university of Zurich (Evans, 2013). Fictive marriages were common (Yukina, 2007) and permitted women to travel abroad and access university studies. Study abroad was a liberating experience for Russian woman, but the government soon made this illegal and promised to provide education facilities in the country (Evans, 2013). The new feminist groups were making petitions in order to establish separate university courses for women, and were even supported by a letter from John Stuart Mill ( Evans, 2013) ; such schools and centres were established in the 1870's. Despite constant repressions and a series of setbacks feminists continued to struggle against the reversal decisions of the state concerning the quotas and the access to education for women throughout the years, challenging the government's decisions and proposing alternatives.

Nevertheless, the liberal feminist movements were starting to be seen as ineffective, because overt opposition and criticism towards the state was punished by police repression, and therefore the idea that real reform was only possible through revolution was starting to emerge ( Evans, 2013).

Starting from the end of the XX century, women's clubs, associations and organizations were actively being created in Russia; this resulted in dense women networks in major Russian cities, and ultimately gave birth to one of the major women's associations in Russia, the "Russian women's mutual-charitable society" in Saint-Petersburg in 1895, who initiated the famous first Russian Women's Congress in 1908 (Kuraev, 2020).

Because of the ineffectiveness of the liberal feminist movement (even though they were regarded as radicals by most of the population and the state), as the education they helped provide was invaluable in itself in an authoritarian monarchy, more radical feminists abandoned the movement and concentrated on revolutionary activity by joining new political parties such as the Social Revolutionaries and the Social Democrats (Evans, 2013). The changing political situation in Russia therefore created disagreements within the feminist movement, with younger members advocating for a more radical and belligerent

political action and accusing the older members of wanting to negotiate with an authoritarian regime. Even though the first feminist organizations had undoubtedly helped develop a feminist consciousness amongst its members (Evans, 2013) they had, perhaps, outlived themselves in a political situation that had become unsustainable, and where younger and more radical groups were taking their place and questioning not only the role of women in society but the whole oppressive system that ruled the country. The situation had reached its culminative point at the beginning of the XX century, with Marxist feminists vehemently opposing “bourgeois” feminists in a preamble of the Russian Revolution.

#### **4. Women and the revolution, separation of Marxist and “bourgeois” feminism**

It has been argued that because of the fact that in Tsarist Russia both men and women were equal in not having political rights there was not such a big separation, compared to Europe, between men and women of the educated class (Evans, 2013). This had changed drastically after the 1905 Revolution. After the publication of the October 17 manifesto men had acquired some political rights, whereas women had received no citizenship recognition at all. Starting from this historical moment a new period in the evolution of the women’s movement in Russia begins; it gains strength through the new social base represented by the growing proletariat, who is also becoming familiar with the ideas of feminism. The women’s movement becomes therefore much more heterogenic, even though its main objectives do not change: the demand of equal civil and political rights (Ayvazova, 1995). The main groups representing the movement and fighting for this equality were the “Russian women's mutual-charitable society”, the radical “Union for equality of women”, the “Women’s progressive party” and the “Russian league for women’s equality”. The

culmination of the numerous feminist activities led by these groups was the earlier mentioned first Russian Women's Congress in 1908 (Ayvazova, 1995).

The congress resulted in heated debates between the partisans of the so-called "equality feminism" and "difference feminism" represented by members of the pejoratively called "bourgeois" feminism (The "*Ravnopravki*") and the new proletarians (now called Marxist Feminists), with Alexandra Kollontai and her group of Bolshevik delegates provocatively leaving the hall during the congress. Because of the political situation and the general fight for equality of women and men in this period of time in Russia, equality feminism was finding more and more adepts (Ayvazova, 1995).

Marxist theoreticians consider that the oppression of women, as well as the exploitation of the proletariat under capitalism is due to separation of labor and private property (Osipovich, 1993). Marx had never expressed his view in detail on the oppression of women as a separate issue, different from class oppression, but this topic had been treated briefly in the introduction of Engels's "The Origin of the Family". Engels argued that the decisive element in history is not only production but also reproduction of life, and its material requirements, as this is necessary for the propagation of the species (Engels, 1884). Bebel, in his book "Woman and socialism" also stated that socialism will liberate the woman, and that in a socialist future she will: "be entirely independent, both socially and economically. She will not be subjected to even a trace of domination and exploitation, but will be free and man's equal, and mistress of her own lot." (Bebel, 2005) Bebel also recognized the intersectionality of the oppression of women, who were exploited as women, but also as proletarian workers (Yukina, 2014).

Marxist feminists therefore considered bourgeois feminist classist, and not representing the needs of the proletary women. From a Marxist perspective, class inequality and oppression is the main and primary form of social hierarchy in society and gender inequality is inevitable and always occurs in a capitalist system (Yukina, 2014).

The first main Marxist feminist theorist in Russia was Alexandra Kollontai (Jelnikova, 2003). She was one of the most vehement opposers to “bourgeois” feminism. She considered the activity of its members dangerous for the socialist movement, as it tried to “distract” women from the class fight of the proletariat and therefore create a split in the socialist movement (Osipovich, 1993). It might be interesting to mention that despite the numerous accusations of Kollontai towards the women of the so-called “bourgeois” feminism movement concerning their class status and wealth, many of these women were actually part of the impoverished intelligentsia (teachers, educators, village doctors), when Kollontai herself was originally from a wealthy noble family and owner of a private estate that she had inherited from her father (Yukina, 2014). Despite the great advances that Kollontai had later on helped achieve for the Russian women, her opposition and anger against the *Ravnopravki* was due to strong position on class and the fact that she ignored clear inconsistencies between Marxist theory and Russian realities (Yukina, 2014). Kollontai had correctly explained at great length the limitations and the class nature of the women’s movement concerning working class women, but unfortunately she did not extend her analysis to the male attitudes within her own party and government; this resulted in a constant opposition, criticism and hostility towards her from her male comrades, which had affected her greatly throughout her life (Lokaneeta, 2001). Indeed, Kollontai was hated by the Russian feminists for her political radicalism and despised by the Russian socialists, who accused her of feminism (Osipovich, 1993).

During the turbulent years between the two Russian revolutions various feminist organizations co-existed in the country, the main being the liberal-democrats (who demanded state reforms that would allow women’s equality), the socio-democrats (proletarians who considered the women’s questions from a Marxist point and stated that a class revolution would solve the issue) and the national-patriots (who were against the equality of men and women) (Staroush, 2011).

Women not only played an important role in the Russian Revolution, but were the impetus behind it (Rossmiller, 2018). Hoping for a better future and willing to

fight next to their male comrades, women of all classes joined the Bolsheviks and contributed to their activities by organizing party groups, writing and distributing journals and leading strikes. They were the major force behind the revolution and the later on established Soviet Union, and it should not be forgotten that the February revolution of 1917 had begun as a protest on International Women's Day, organized by the working women of Petrograd (Saint-Petersburg) (Rossmiller, 2018).

The role of women is usually downplayed by historians and The Russian Revolution (as well as Russian history in general) was not an exception. Women such as Alexandra Kollontai, Inessa Armand or Nadezhda Krupskaya are almost always mentioned by historians in a romantic sort of way, described as the wives or lovers of Lenin, and their private life is usually discussed in detail. Their important role as revolutionaries and first leaders of the Marxist Feminist movement in Russia is often not only ignored but mocked and laughed upon.

After the revolution of 1917 only the proletarian Marxist group of feminists had remained, and the leaders and participants of the other groups had either left activism or emigrated to Europe (Staroush, 2011). So, who were these three famous women and how did they contribute to the role and position of women in Russia and the Soviet Union?

## **5. Revolutionary feminists: Alexandra Kollontai, Nadezhda Krupskaya and Inessa Armand**

Women have been historically made invisible in history, erased from its course, and their works have been forgotten. Because of the continuing invisibility of the

significant scale of the involvement of women in historical movement and moments, reclaiming the role of women in history writing traditions can be a tool to understand and counter gender inequality (Shrivastava, 2017).

The first most important women revolutionaries and Marxist feminists who had brought great advances to the condition of women in the new Soviet Union were Alexandra Kollontai, Nadezhda Krupskaya and Inessa Armand.

Alexandra Kollontai was born in a wealthy educated family and had been married and had a child before leaving her family and joining the revolutionary forces. After the revolution Kollontai had been greatly involved in new policies for women liberation in the Soviet Union and had written a great number of books on this subject. During her years in the position of *Peoples Commisar* following the revolution, Kollontai had implemented pro-feminist governmental politics, and had promoted questions concerning women to a state level (Yukina, 2014). She had also created the Department of Protection of Maternity and Childhood and supported the state's new liberating policies that cancelled church marriage, promoted equal rights for women and men, authorized divorce and abortion (Yukina, 2014). Kollontai is mostly remembered for her opinions of the family and sexuality; she promoted the idea that in the future, with the fall of capitalism, new forms of family will arise. In her works she follows the ideas promoted by Marxists, and advocates for a "liberation of women from kitchen slavery", stating that under Communism women will be completely liberated from housework and childcare, as these will be taken care of by the state (Staroush, 2011). Her ideas about the relationships between men and women were greatly criticized by other party members, as she advocated the ideas of free sexual relationships based on trust and mutual respect as acceptable, considering the old marriage model as outlived (Staroush, 2011). Kollontai was continually criticized and silenced for her opinions, and ultimately sent out of the country for diplomatic work. In her writings, she mentions her sadness and deception concerning her male colleagues attitude towards the Women Question since the early years of the Soviet Union : "This is when I first

understood how little care our party takes of the destiny of the Russian women workers, and how little interest it has to the women's liberation movement" (Kollontai, cited by Yukina, 2007). Lokaneeta (2001) argues that "It was Kollontai's ideas on sexual relations that became a major source of criticism within the Soviet party. Although there were some writings on the subject by others, they were not as radically different from the analysis of Marx, Engels and Bebel" (Lokaneeta, 2001). It is of great interest that even though Kollontai advocated for the equality of sexes, she failed to avoid biological determinism, as she had never questioned the role of men in reproductive work and the role of women as mothers. Despite her great insights and fight for women's rights, her limitations include the failure to develop the ideas on autonomy and specificity of the women's movement, the overemphasis on of the larger interests of the state and the economy over individual rights, her uncritical acceptancy of the definitions of reproductive rights where women were considered as agents of reproduction for the welfare of the community, and not individuals, as well as the lack of understanding and consideration of the concept of women's choices (Lokaneeta, 2001). It is worth mentioning that in her later years she did recognize that the Revolution and socialism per se did not change the situation of Russian women, in 1926 she wrote: "Of course, Soviet women have received all the rights, but in practice they still live under the old yoke : without real power in family life, enslaved by a thousand of petty housework chores, carrying the full burden of maternity and even the material necessities of the family" (Kollontai, cited by Osipovich, 1993). Unfortunately, she did not develop this idea more in depth, in part because of the probable impossibility to do so without criticizing the Soviet state and therefore putting herself at risk. Nevertheless, it is important to analyse her work taking in account her own personal experience as a woman in a patriarchal society, as well as the historical moment when she was acting. Despite her misunderstandings and errors concerning the women question Kollontai had also provided great

advances for the equality of women in the Soviet Union, which had far greater rights than women of other countries in the same time period.

Nadezhda Krupskaya has been described in most writings as “the wife of Lenin” and her true role in the Russian Revolution on in the Commissariat of Education of the Soviet Union has been downplayed and ignored (González Forster, 2019; Isachenko, 2017). However, Krupskaya had begun her revolutionary activity long before having met Vladimir Ulyanov Lenin (Isachenko, 2017). Krupskaya came from a bourgeois but impoverished family, and after the death of her father was left with no choice but to work as a teacher at a night school, in order to support herself and her mother. She had come in to contact with Marxist groups during her university studies (Yukina, 2007).

As Kollontai, Krupskaya believed that the fight for women’s rights could only be established through the fight of the proletarian class (González Forster, 2019) and participated in the Bolshevik activity before, during and after the Revolution. Despite her great contributions as a translator, writer and militant, she had passed her life in the shade of Lenin. Krupskaya published articles and attended conferences of Communist education and the situation of women in Russia (González Forster, 2019). Throughout her life, she had published more than 3000 works (books, pamphlets, articles) and had always promoted free public education for all in mixed (not sex-segregated), secular schools, where the school committees would be publicly elected and children would have the freedom to receive education in their native language (Krupskaya, 2017: 31-34 cited by González Forster, 2019). The fact that she occupied the post of secretary of the Russian socio-democrat workers party in 1905 also demonstrates that she had a political career of her own (Isachenko, 2017). Commonly labelled as “The Bride of the Revolution”, Krupskaya has unfortunately not been appreciated as a character of her own in Russian history, and has been represented ultimately as a tragic figure at the end of her life, when she was struggling to defend Lenin’s legacy after his death under the reign of Joseph Stalin (McNeal, 1972).

Inessa Armand

Inessa Armand came from a French family with Russian roots and moved to Russia at a young age to live with her grand-mother and aunt (González Forster, 2019). She had joined the socio-democrat party in 1903 and shortly later meets Lenin and Krupskaya. Just as Kollontai and Krupskaya, Armand is mainly (falsely) known to have been Lenin's mistress and not much of her political and social activity has been mentioned as of importance on a historical level. However, Armand had been chosen to be the spokeswoman of the Committee of International Relations (she spoke 5 languages) (Elwood, 1992 cited by González Forster, 2019), organized the International Conference of Socialist Women in Switzerland in 1917, had fought throughout her life for the rehabilitation of prostitutes, for the organization of women workers, and for the equality of women in the Soviet Union (González Forster, 2019). She was also the first leader of the Zhenotdel (State women's department) until her death and founded the first socialist women's magazine *Rabotnitsa*.

All three of these women fought for gender equality and considered the "women question" as of high political importance. Sadly, all three had been opposed to by the men of the Communist party during their life and mocked as well as criticized after their death. It is almost impossible to find works that treat them as subjects of their own worth and not appendices of the men in their life.

## **6. Advancements of the 1920's : The Zhenotdel**

In the years following the Russian Revolution great advances concerning gender equality, and more generally citizen rights were made.

The *Zhenotdel* (women's department) was created in 1919 in order to provide an autonomous space for women within the Russian Socialist Democratic movement and were a result of an arduous struggle of revolutionary women, most of all Alexandra Kollontai (Lokaneeta, 2001). It can be argued that her persistence for the creation of these departments that would treat specifically women's issues reflects the recognition of the patriarchal biases of the Bolshevik party, and therefore the necessity for an autonomous space for women (Lokaneeta, 2001). The central idea of the *Zhenotdel* was the creation of the "new Soviet woman", whose defining characteristics were independence and activism (Clements, 1992). Their main activities were organizing meetings and conferences (also for non-party women) such as for example the delegate meetings for working peasant women and housewives who elected themselves their representatives and discussed local problems, activities and discussions that would allow women to be independent, installing laws protecting working mothers and their children and setting up canteens and creches to unburden the working women (Lokaneeta, 2001). During their first years of activity the *Zhenotdels* legalized abortion and depanelized prostitution, installed laws protecting working mothers and their children, and fought on a state level in order to improve the condition of Russian women (Hayden, 1976).

The difficulty to bring women into the political process was mainly due to the double burden of most of the women (Lokaneeta, 2001) as well as the lack of professionally formed women given the fact that in the 1920's most women in Russia were illiterate (Osipovich, 1993). The *Zhenotdel* had also, since its beginning faced strong opposition from the Communist party and its male members. The party members did not take interest in its work, openly mocked it (Hayden, 1976) and considered that more serious problems should be treated at party meetings. It was, however, supported by Lenin, with whom Kollontai worked closely and who considered that a women's department within the party was necessary for the "purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing

them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence” (Lenin, cited by Hayden, 1976).

The fight for subsistence of the Zhenotdel within the Communist party was continuous, throughout the years its central staff was constantly reduced, its work was discredited as being unimportant and massive complaints from the leaders of the department demonstrate the contempt with which its members were treated during the official congresses by other male members of the party (Hayden, 1976). The work of the Zhenotdels had also faced strong opposition in some regions of the Soviet Union. The department had a particular importance for the Soviet State in the muslim regions of the Union. Indeed, the Soviet citizens of these regions were still highly religious, and most lived in a traditional lifestyle, practicing monogamy, forbidding women to work and respecting religious rules in their daily life. The “women liberation” campaign started by the Bolsheviks in these regions was met with great opposition from the population (Sherstyukov, 2020). Some of the main goals of the women liberation campaign were the eradication of “feodal practices” such as the Kalym (bride price to be paid for a future wife in Central Asia), marriage with minors, rape, the tradition of women abduction, etc. (Sherstyukov, 2020). The “Hudjum” (women liberation movement) was done through information given to women through the women’s departments, and was met by opposition through religious talks given in Mosques and family meetings, street manifestations and pamphlets (Sherstyukov, 2020). Kollontai considered (and quite rightly so) that women in the Muslim regions of Russia were more oppressed by patriarchy and religion and was campaigning for them to abandon their traditional clothes, including the muslim veil (Whalley, 2018). Workers of the Zhenotdels in these regions, as well as women who were willing to follow the Soviet liberation women had been threatened, attacked and in some cases killed. Savage repercussions followed for example the mass manifestations of women in Tashkent, Uzbekistan on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March of 1927, where women took off their veils, burned them and cried revolutionary statements during the celebration; after this event many of them

became outcasts, were raped or murdered by traditionalists and their bodies were hung out on display in villages; local activists were also threatened and killed (Whalley, 2018). Between 1927 and 1928 more than 2500 women workers of the Zhenotdels, women's clubs and libraries had been murdered in Uzbekistan (Zamonov, 2017).

Lokaneeta (2001) states that the "Zhenotdel represented a symbol of struggle for autonomy, which however failed to develop into a women's movement for their rights in a socialist society; nevertheless they did help develop a feminist consciousness amongst the Soviet Women, by destroying gender-role stereotypes of a patriarchal family and the traditional models of behaviour of women, women were able to increase their self-consciousness through participation in political and economic life and adopt new roles by overcoming internal limitations (Shapir, cited by Yukina, 2007). The liquidation of the Zhenotdels in 1930 was unexpected and is defined by Yukina (2007) as a "sign of withdrawal of democracy in the country". She argues that it was considered as an extremely radical project even at the beginning of the revolutionary changes in the country and this had of course become worse during the period of power concentration and Stalinism (Yukina, 2007). The Zhenotdel, during its short existence, had provided great progress for the liberation of women in the Soviet Union, by introducing literacy campaigns, providing adequate care and health advice for mothers and children, improving the life conditions of Muslim women in Central Asia and bringing real improvement in women's day-to-day life (Hayden, 1976).

## **7. One step forwards, two steps back- biological determinism, “emancipation from above” and the end of the Women Question**

After the advancements of the 1920's, women had again, unfortunately, been stripped of their rights during the Stalin era. Scott (1982) argues that Marxism is a patriarchal ideology, and that women were ultimately, after fighting next to male comrades for their liberation, enslaved by these same people. “Classical Marxist theory effectively renders women invisible and places decision making about the future structure of society firmly in the hands of men, who traditionally dominate production. It does not uncover the dialectic relationship between the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ and the necessity of synthesizing the needs which arise out of these two areas of life. It encourages the assumption that women can be successfully integrated and ‘made equal’ in a society whose goals and priorities continue to be set from a male perspective” (Scott, 1982). It has demonstrated that new legal conditions such as an anti-discrimination legislation, day-care, etc are not enough if women’s hidden economic contribution of social reproduction work is invisible and not recognized by the state (Scott, 1982). A clear example of this is the idea that most Soviet (and modern) Russian woman express when saying that they are not interested in women’s liberation as their experience proves that it is an idea that has failed (Holland et al., 1985).

This can be distinctively seen in the situation lived by the women of the Soviet Union starting from the 30's.

From the 1930's until the 1960's the official message of the Soviet government about the Woman Question was that it had been solved (Holland et al., 1985). Women were considered to be completely emancipated and critical discourse was not possible. As women’s issues came off the agenda during the Stalin years abortion was banned in 1933, criticized for lowering the countries birth rate. Salmenniemi & Adamson (2015) argue that the Soviet Union’s women’s liberation can be defined as “emancipation from above”; the Soviet gender order was also characterized by an emphasis on equality but difference, where gender

relations were apprehended in essentialist terms and male dominance in the public sphere was unquestionable (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, biological determinism and pseudo-scientific studies have historically been used to discredit women and justify the male oppression of the patriarchy. Such dualism has been effectively used in the Soviet Union, in order to improve the falling birth-rate of the population. Anne Oakley argues that throughout history, biological studies of male and female personality differences have emerged and proliferated at times when women had been particularly demanding and assertive, therefore challenging the status quo (Holland et al., 1985). This theory can be applied to the situation in the Soviet Union, where the strong insistence on the natural and immutable sex differences in male and female personalities have emerged in a social context where the concept of femininity and masculinity have undergone consistent changes after the revolution (Holland et al., 1985).

During the first years of the Soviet Union, the concept of the “New Soviet Person” was promoted, accentuating the equality between men and women and stressing its all-round personality and qualities. Sex and gender differences were not discussed, and the concept of equality supposed a similarity rather than a difference between the sexes. Major Soviet psychologists, pedagogues and writers such as Krupskaya, Pavlov, Vygotsky and Makarenko all insisted on the importance of the environment and the society for the development of the individual’s personality. Unfortunately, due to a falling birth-rate, many theorists had started publishing works on the biological and psychological differences between men and women starting from the 1960’s , as a consequence of a debate on whether should sex education was advisable for Soviet schools (Holland et al., 1985). The concept of the equality of sexes was redefined using the common Russian catchphrase :”being equal does not mean being the same “(Holland et al., 1985). A concentrated pronatalist propaganda method was used in order to increase the birth-rate of Russian women in big cities, when the contrary method was used in Central Asia, where ideological messages were

used in order to decrease the birth-rate (which was much higher due religious and traditional factors). Studies on the difference of gender development and psychology had started to rapidly develop out of demographic, political and social concerns, and became a major preoccupation in the late 1970's (Attwood, 1990). Indeed, by the 1980's Russia had entered an unprecedented "demographic crisis", when the one-child family had become the norm in big cities, the government had therefore introduced various pro-nativity policies, in order to install the three-child family norm, which was considered to be ideal not only from a demographic point of view but was also represented as a "qualitative improvement" of the population, improving the psychological health of the nation and physical health of mothers and children (Attwood, 1990).

The studies on gender differences common for those years aimed to place stress on the "biological basis" of female and male personality, insist on their inevitability and develop training programs for parents and teachers in order to foster these differences from an early age, in order to avoid the so-called "feminization" of men and "masculinization" of women and its adverse social and demographic implications (Attwood, 1990). Soviet social scientists insisted on the "inalienable and irreplaceable" functions of motherhood and child-rearing of women and therefore considered that they belonged to a different group of workers than men; women were depicted as sensitive, delicate, thoughtful, gentle, emotional and physically in need of protection from men (Holland et al., 1985). It was obviously extremely convenient for the Soviet government to support such ideas, in order to postpone the socialization of domestic labour and continue to use the reproductive labour of women for free. Women labour was indeed crucial in the Soviet Union, as rapid industrialization had begun to increase in importance since the Stalin years (Buckley, 1981). Female labour was considerably less paid than male labour and concentrated on unskilled and often manual work; this led to occupational segregation with some sectors becoming almost entirely female (Buckley, 1981). Furthermore, a list of banned professions existed, which made it impossible for women to work in 456 jobs in

different production sectors. The list was initially created from a positive discrimination point of view, in order to free women from dangerous and physically difficult professions. These were generally more well paid positions, which increased the pay-gap and gender inequalities in the labour market. The list was still active in 2019 (Nikerichev, 2019). The main argument from preventing women to access these jobs was that such occupations endanger women's reproductive health, even though women were allowed to perform lower-paid jobs that entailed similar conditions (Sperling, 2015) and that the working conditions also affected the male workers health.

As a result of such policies, due to lack of public services for childcare and the inexistent participation of men in childcare and housework, the Soviet women were trapped under the double burden of working full-time and being the sole reproductive workers of the family. This of course inevitably resulted in a fall in the birth-rate. The patriarchal ruling system did not question at any moment the role of men in this situation. In the 70's the Soviet state did finally recognize that some inequalities between men and women exist, but it never went as far as to question why they exist (Holland et al., 1985).

Testimonies of women of this period demonstrate the unsustainable pressure that women experienced from the full-time work in addition to full responsibility of all reproductive work and the pressure of appearing feminine and desirable in their role of women. Their failure to not fulfil all of these expectations usually appeared to be personal, and not political, as they tried to match up harder with the ideal of the truly feminine woman (Holland et al., 1985). A lack of social services and attitudes that had not changed (or worsened due to a revival of biological determinism) impeded the women's liberation. Long queues in shops, technological barriers (absence of electrical house appliances) and the inadequacy of childcare facilities (poor care and sanitary conditions, many children, lack of educators) made the life of Soviet women even harder. Any kind of opposition from women (in the private sphere, as it was not possible at a public level) met harsh opposition, advice from famous magazines or

psychologists included texts on the importance of cultivating and instilling in girls such qualities as femininity, gentleness, kindness , housewifeliness and neatness (Buckley, 1981).

Mary Buckley mentions this extract from a Soviet magazine in 1977, which answers a letter sent by a reader: “Girls must be brought up to be aware of their natural destiny as mothers, nurturers of children and keepers of the family. Boys should be brought up from childhood to be chivalrous toward women “(Belskaia, 1977:12, cited by Buckley, 1981).

Despite pronatalist propaganda supported by the state the birth rate continued to fall, and so did the Soviet workforce. Population politics were introduced by the state in order to improve the situation. These included the creation of more childcare centres, pioneer camps for children to go to in summer and a reduction of the working day for mothers (Buckley, 1981). Unfortunately, the government never questioned the fact that only women were responsible of reproduction work and the importance of the investment of men in this sector is inexistent. The politics implemented by the state were targeted only towards women, in order to help them have more time for their “home burden” by reducing their “work burden” (and subsequently their salary) (Buckley, 1981). The Women Question was therefore obviously not solved, and the politics of the state only worsened the situation. Even Soviet sociologists, when interviewed for Mary Buckley’s book *Soviet Scientists talking* replied to authors questions about women equality and Russia and the problems the women were facing by stating that the state should provide better services in order to lessen the home burden for the Soviet women and provide adequate appliances for easing housework. Only some of the specialists answered mentioning that “other family members could help the women at home”, and most agreed upon the fact that there is a need to “distinguish between equality before the law and equality which allows for the special characteristics of each sex. In so far as women have a special function of childbirth, they are not identical with men. Notions of equality must be taken in account” (Buckley, 1986). Soviet biological determinism therefore

permitted to oppress the women by relegating them to the private sphere and enslaving them with unpaid reproductive work under pseudo-scientific claims about the natural feminine aspects of these occupations, due to the function of childbirth.

Feminism was inexistent and independent women's movements, as well as any other independent political movements were not permitted.

The only exception to this absence of feminist organizations is a group of Leningrad (Saint-Petersburg) women that had created a feminist organization at the end of the 1970's, during a wave of dissident movements in the Soviet Union (Ayvazova, 1995). This act had been unprecedented and quite unexpected in a rather passive socio-political context of Soviet women (Yukina, 2007).

In 1979 a group of Russian women composed by Tatyana Mamonova, Yulia Voznesenskaya, Tatyana Gorecheva and Natalia Malakhovskaya co-authored a self-published feminist almanac called "Woman and Russia". The leader of the group was Tatyana Mamonova, who had explained to her friends what feminism was after she had read various feminist works and biographies of prominent Russian feminist figures (Yasenitskaya, 2020). Despite their lack of general knowledge about feminism due to the absence and censure of most feminist works in the Soviet Union, as well as the language barrier, the authors considered that the Women Question was not solved by the Soviet state which had replaced women's liberation by a more exquisite and occult form of exploitation and discrimination of women (Yukina, 2014). The almanac was composed of various articles written by the authors and relating their personal experiences as women in the Soviet Union. They described the horror of Russian maternity houses and abortion clinics and the inhumane treatments the women there had to suffer, Russian female prisons, meagre single mother benefits, the difficulty that women faced in professional spheres, problems related to child education and religion (Mamonova et al. 1980). Despite its small edition (10 copies that were passed hand-to hand amongst the Russian dissident circles), the almanac had attracted the attention of the regime that had

reacted extremely negatively to the denouncement of the situation of women in the Soviet Union (Yukina, 2007). After constant threats that the members received from the government (including the threat to take away their children) the members, after having disagreements between a more atheist or religious approach, had separated in two separate groups, later creating the Feminist-religious magazine “Maria” invented by Yulia Voznesenskaya (Yukina, 2007). Most of them were then forced to immigrate, under the threat to otherwise be imprisoned. It is interesting to mention that these women did not self-identify as feminists, but rather as dissidents. Feminism was associated with the Soviet regime, as was therefore seen as something negative, but they also did not find their place in a male-dominated dissident layers of the Russian society, who did not see importance in women’s issues (Yukina, 2007). The rejection of all Soviet aspects of society, and therefore feminism, is seen in the “orthodox-feminist” approach of Voznesenskaya, who sees religion as an opposition force to the state, that would help women develop in her place in the family and her natural role. The activity of these women and their consciousness can therefore not really be defined as feminist, but they do offer an interesting outlook from the inside about the situation of women in the Soviet Union and the general absence of equality that reigned during that period despite the official gender-equality discourse.

## **8. Perestroika, fall of the Soviet Union, the role of women in the new Russia**

During Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika period during the 80’s biological determinist claims were only getting stronger and public claims were made for women to have a more traditional role in the society. For example, in his 1988 book *Perestroika and the new way of thinking* Mikhail Gorbachev first explains the importance of the newly developed Zhensovet (an organism similar to the 1920’s Zhenotdely that dealt with women issues), talks about the importance of

women emancipation and the equality that the Soviet Union has achieved in comparison with the Western countries, however, he also mentions the “specifics of the needs of women related to their role as mothers and housewives” and the fact that the State should do something to solve this issue, as women who are working full-time cannot take proper care of their family and this results in negative effects on : “the behavior of children and youngsters, moral issues, culture and the fall of the traditional family, because of the devaluation of the spousal obligation” (Gorbachev, 1988). Women are therefore made responsible for societal issues in the Soviet society, in the same way as it was done in earlier years when the “masculinization” of women was said to lead to alcoholism and a fall of birth-rate in the Union (Attwood, 1990).

After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, Russia had started its transition from a socialist system to a capitalist one. Western specialists from the USA and the IMF strongly advised to employ a “Shock Therapy”, ignoring the advice of Russian scholars and expecting a “market revolution” (Stiglitz, 2002). The results, as we know now, were disastrous for the country, and most of all, for its people.

Implementing a so-called free-market system based on the principles of liberalization, privatization and stabilization began the Russian neoliberal experiment. Boris Yeltsin, who had very poor knowledge of the actual capitalist history, accepted fully the neoliberal theory and followed its prescriptions “to the letter” (Kotz, 1999). Despite warnings from Russian and international critics about the danger of simply dismantling the soviet planned economy and hoping for an effective capitalist system to arise, no action was taken in order to implement an active state guidance and assistance that could nurture productive capitalist enterprises. The results of such politics were disastrous for the population, and as usual, affected women much more than men. Unemployment, inflation, a decline in wages and a general economic insecurity (Harper, 1999 cited by Lafont, 2001) affected the population heavily. Women were also starting to lose some of the benefits they had had under socialism

(Poolos, 1999 cited by Lafont, 2001). Women's unemployment was rising to rates much higher than that of men because women were mainly concentrated in the light industry, government employment and social services- sectors that had been the first victims of the neoliberal economic reforms (Occhipinti, 1996). Furthermore, this economical crisis had forced many Russian women in to prostitution in order to survive, and human-traffic mafias quickly developed their business by luring women and selling children in prostitution nets (Alalehto, 2002), later, this was followed by the surrogacy mother business (Weis, 2019). In is in this socio-economic climate that post, or anti-feminism had arisen in Russia.

It takes its origins in the Soviet determinist approach and a strong rejection of any feminist claims or ethics as being paradoxically too Soviet (masculinization of women/ feminization of men in the name of equality) as well as too Western (contrary to Russian traditions and cultural beliefs, and therefore dangerous for the stability of the Russian society).

Imagery of the traditional wife and mother started to appear in public discourse and media, but despite this most women had to continue working in order to support their family, as wages went down and state support for working women had been eroding (Occhipinti, 1996).

Occhipinti (1996) states than in the 90's post-soviet countries : "women who are out of work because of the poor job market may prefer to identify themselves as full-time housewives, gaining a degree of legitimacy and status that is generally denied to men who are involuntarily unemployed. Often, the people I spoke with believed the idea of a 'househusband' was amusing; expectations for men to contribute to household labour seemed virtually non-existent" (Occhipinti, 1996). The societal pressure on women to "return" home and be a good mother and housewife further on created more issues for Russian women, as women who continued working and placed their children in State-run child-care institutions were considered as "bad" mothers , whereas women who had to juggle between their job and their family were also considered as "bad" and less desirable

workers because their role as a mother would affect their working performance (Neme´nyi, 1995 cited by Lafont, 2001).

The rejection of the socialist past also included criticism of the “genderless” “Homo Sovieticus” (Riabova, A; Riabov, 2002). Russian men were therefore considered to be stripped of their masculinity by the Soviet regime while the women were “unfeminine”. The heavy physical work of Russian women was often mentioned as antinatural, and a “normalization” which implied a return to “natural” models of femininity and masculinity as well as a revival of traditional family attitudes was propagandized (Riabova, A; Riabov, 2002). Therefore, the installation of neoliberal capitalism in the former Soviet Union has been accompanied by a revival and reassertion of dominating masculinity and worsening social position of women (Connell 2000, 51 cited by Riabova, A; Riabov).

The new life style propagandized through the media combined adherence to new democratic values, anti-communism and sexuality (Riabova, A; Riabov, 2002). Women objectification was seen as something new and modern, and people who opposed it were considered as boring, old and communist.

After the fall on the Soviet Union, some feminist movements had appeared in early Russian democracy, under Boris Yeltsin’s rule. For example, in 1991 and 1992 the Independent Women’s Forum was organized in Dubna, and more than 70 women’s organisations had participated (Aristova, 2017). Women organizations had been created around the country and they were trying to enter in communication with the government; in 1993 a new political party, “Women of Russia” had balloted in the government Douma elections and won 8.13% of the electors voices. Furtheron, more women were entering political parties and ecofeminist groups had started to organize congresses and Forums in major Russian cities, while the first women crisis centers, for women and children victims of gender violence were being created in 1995 (Aristova, 2017).

Unfortunately, most of these centres and groups had to cease their activity shortly after the ascension to power of Vladimir Putin in 1999.

## **9. Vladimir Putin's regime and current situation of women in Russia today**

At the beginning of the 2000s Russia had been described as a "managed democracy", an "illiberal democracy" and a "competitive authoritarian regime", all of these titles indicating a lack of a fully democratic political system (Levitsky & Way, cited by Sperling, 2015). The crisis due to neoliberalism was therefore a perfect ground for the appearance of a charismatic leader whose leadership was based on populist appeals. Playing the card of contrast and defining his difference from Yeltsin by emphasizing his virility and youth (by using aggressive language, playing sports) (Eksi & Wood, 2019) Putin had quickly won the sympathy of the Russian citizens and even international observers, positioning himself as a young, thriving and uncorrupted leader, who would lead Russia in its own way, without the help of the greedy West.

Since the beginning of his presence in the Kremlin, Putin has used a very aggressive narrative, similar to Donald's Trump "Make America Great Again" and had reinforced the populist notion that he alone (not institutions, economics, social forces) would "rise Russia from its knees" (Eksi & Wood, 2019).

Eksi and Wood (2019) argue that Putin's form of populism based on gender stereotyped masculine performances was used in order to hide the undermining of democratic institutions and divert the people's attention from serious socio-economic issues, including policies that directly harm the citizens.

Putin's performance has always been heavily gendered, he has self-appropriated the Russian masculine figure of the "muzhik" a term that appeared in the last years of the soviet period, and that gained positive valence and came to connote the "norm of modern masculinity" in Russia (Sterling, 2015). Putin has reinvented the feeling of patriotism amongst the Russians using a strong nativist discourse, and by reinforcing some of the founding myths of Russia and the USSR. To cite just a few examples, Putin has given great importance of the celebration of the Great Patriotic War (WW2 in the West) and has created a myth and ritual that connects him personally to this historical event, therefore uniting Russia and showing him as a natural-hero leader and warrior and patriot, and giving a rise of a patriotic people to the rest of the Russians (Wood, 2011). On the other hand, he also gives great importance to the Orthodox Church, demonstrates publicly his closeness with the Church and the Patriarch, and is undeniably one of the reasons for the religious boom that has taken place in Russia over the last 20 years (Sterling, 2015), that was recently demonstrated by the Romanov March in 2018, when thousands of people marched the streets of major Russian cities to commemorate the murder of the Romanov family by the Bolsheviks (Gershkovich, 2018).

Putin's gendered regime reaffirms traditional roles and harshly represses non-traditional behaviour. Feminist groups such as Pussy Riot (even if though they are not considered as strictly feminist inside the Russian feminist groups because of their sexist lyrics) had been publically punished for their actions during the 2010's (Sperling, 2015). Feminist discourse has been silenced in the public space and a strong patriarchal State is becoming more and more authoritarian each year.

Vladimir Putin has used gender politics and gender discourse as a resource of the regime since the beginning of his reign in various forms, by using models of femininity and masculinity to legitimate that regime (Sperling, 2015). Because

gender is one of the most readily available and recognizable aspects of identity (Sperling, 2015) and because of the strong biologically determinist approach during the Soviet era, Putin had no trouble using it to build his authority on the political arena. His reign is based on tradition concept of heteronormativity, traditional gender roles and is framed by strong patriarchal concepts.

The more restrictive regime installed by Vladimir Putin resulted in a step backwards for the feminist movement in Russia. Starting from the mid-2000's new state restrictions on NGO's (one of the main feminist forms of action in Russia) required them to report foreign funding, which eventually resulted in the termination of most of the Western (and main) funding of such organizations (Johnson J; Saarinen, 2013). These measures were worsened by new state restrictions on the right to public protest and the independence of the media and completed by assassinations of famous women activists such as Anna Politkovskaya and Natalia Estemirova (Johnson J; Saarinen, 2013). Even though Russia was considered as a "semi-authoritarian" regime until most recent years (Robertson, 2010, cited by Johnson J & Saarinen, 2013) from my point of view it has become fully authoritarian in the last 5 years. Johnson and Saarinen (2013) argue that "authoritarianism tends to close political opportunities for contentious activism and circumscribe the norms available for framing activists claims, driving feminists underground both in terms of their activities and the claims they can make". Feminist movements in Russia have therefore become mostly unofficial, relying on small support groups and social media, in order to spread feminist consciousness in a non-official way. Feminism, therefore, exists as a non-academic, non-institutional personal project in Russia (Voronina, 2009). Official women's organisations, such as "crisis centres" for victims of gender violence, will never dare to voice the fact of structural discrimination against women in Russia (Voronina, 2009), or question the patriarchal Russian society which is the base and origin of violent attitudes towards women. Because of the laws not permitting foreign funding for NGOs, most crisis centres in modern Russia are partly governmental, and therefore

distance themselves from feminism and feminist terms, rarely identifying as feminists or including advocacy or other politically transformative work (Johnson J; Saarinen, 2013). They therefore embrace the neoliberal and right-wing conventional notions of violence as “violence in the family” ignoring the term of gender violence and intentionally not relating the crisis centre activity with feminism or mentioning the fact that the majority, if not all, the victims treated by the centres are women (and their children). Domestic violence is usually represented as a result of heavy drinking, alcoholism being a long-term historical social problem in Russia, and is therefore justified by the drinking problem, and not the general attitude Russian men have towards women.

The authoritarian rule installed by Vladimir Putin was on the other hand followed by a strong nativity policy, and the idea of women returning to their homes, after years of abandoning them during the Soviet period, in order to be forced to work outside. Some of the pro-natalist reforms include the 3 year maternity leave and the maternity capital introduced in 2007 (Johnson J; Saarinen, 2013), which is a one-time payment that women receive for their second and third child (equivalent to approximately 5000 EUR in 2019) (*Http://Pro-Materinskiy-Kapital.Ru/*, 2021). As during the “demographic crisis” in the Soviet Union, the government created a clear program for the promotion and support of “traditional” families with two or more children in order to improve the demographic development (Kim, 2016) and furthermore promoted it through state-owned media through the common trend of discussing family topics and promoting the image of the traditional family (Kim, 2016).

Putin has furthermore openly positioned himself as a practicing Orthodox, often appearing on state television next to Patriarch Alexei II and later on Patriarch Kirill in church gatherings and celebrations. The Russian Orthodox Church, that has gained high popularity after the fall of the Soviet Union, clearly represents traditional patriarchal society values. After being largely silenced during the Soviet era, the Russian Orthodox Church was newly empowered to take public positions under Putin’s rule and undeniably embraced patriarchal and

homophobic positions, by endorsing for example amendments to Russian legislation to restrict abortion access and lauding hate crimes against homosexuals (Sperling, 2015). Putin's demographic policy is therefore largely supported by the church and justifies the repression of the feminist and LGBTBI movements by defining them as dangerous for the prosperity of the Russian state and traditional family.

Putin's authoritarian regime is therefore combined and in line with the general and historical biological determinist ideas of the population, the renaissance of Russian Orthodoxy and the strong rejection of all that is Soviet or Western.

Despite an alarming number of inequalities in the Russian society most of them are or have not been discussed until the most recent years. Feminist issues are not mentioned in official state-owned media or on a political level, and are mostly treated by small activist groups, via social media, or in independent media, usually based outside of the Russian Federation (such as the web-based newspaper Meduza.io, considered since 2021 officially as a "foreign agent" in Russia) (Meduza.io, 2021).

Nevertheless, the country does face some serious inequality issues, which have placed it on the 81st place in the 2020 *Global Gender Gap Report*.

Feminist scholars have developed a consensus on the fact that the liberalization of socialist regimes (commonly wrongly labelled as "communist" regimes) fostered patriarchal, neotraditional gender ideology in which women were reassigned to the private sphere and men to the newly empowered public (Watson, 1993, cited by Johnson J; Saarinen, 2013). These traditional and patriarchal beliefs about gender" justified a range of sexist policies and practices in the market, the labour force, the political system, and reproductive policy (Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000 cited by Johnson J; Saarinen, 2013).

In 2020 the main issues on inequality in Russia were political inequality, gender differentiation in the labor market, economical inequality, gender violence,

feminization of certain professions and social reproduction (double burden) (Aleksandrov, 2020).

This can be observed as a direct result of the “patriarchal renaissance” of the Russian society after the fall of the Soviet Union and the authoritarian politics of V. Putin. By embracing neoliberalism and capitalism, concurrence appeared in the labour market and women were shifted out to less payed and prestigious professions, and by dismantling the social sphere, the government transferred the reproduction responsibilities to the women, who were encouraged to embrace the role of “wife and mother” while men were represented as “the bread winners” (O.Shnyrova, interviewed by Aleksandrov, 2020).

Health equality and freedom has gradually been diminished in the recent years, by making access to abortions more difficult and the absence of sexual education at school (considered to be a diversion of the West in order to lower the Russian birth-rate) (A. Temkina, interviewed by Aleksandrov, 2020).

Gender violence is a major problem in Russia, as it is not recognized as a whole phenomenon by the Russian law, and is registered in separate cases of physical violence, verbal threats, etc. (Aleksandrov, 2020). Gender domestic violence has been always present in the Russian society, but it was generally not talked about and considered as a private issue. Recent surveys have brought attention to gender domestic violence, even though it is still a topic that is not easily discussed, and often judged as the responsibility of women, who “provoke” men into violent behaviour. According to a 2002 survey, “up to fifty per cent of married women have experienced physical violence from the side of their husbands at least once, and eighteen per cent of women live in conditions of severe or continuous violence” (Gorshkova and Shurygina 2003, cited by Jäppinen, 2010).

Despite support by feminist groups and some media celebrities, the 2019 Family violence Law Bill (*Federal Law on the Prevention of Family Violence in the Russian Federation*, 2019) which defined family violence and offered direct protection from the state as well as easier juridical procedures for the victims

similar to other European countries, even though it never refers to gender violence, had been denied due to the resistance of conservative and religious groups and the Russian population in general for being anti-traditional and destructive for the family (Aleksandrov, 2020).

Although Russia occupies the first place concerning education equality in the WEF list (World Economic Forum, 2021) there are visible inequalities concerning power positions in the academic structures, such as women being less represented in higher positions (such as university rectors for example) (Aleksandrov, 2020). Furthermore, women earn on average 27,9% less than men, and there is a horizontal gender segregation where women are much more numerous in certain less paid professions. They also generally hesitate before choosing a “masculine” profession because of society pressure (A. Temkina, interviewed by Aleksandrov, 2020). Certain professions are furthermore still legally prohibited to women. The Soviet list of the banned professions was finally changed in 2019, when it was reduced to 98 jobs, thus making it possible for example for the first women train driver to start working in the Moscow Metropolitan in January 2021 (Bacchi, 2021).

Other gender inequality issues in Russia also include sexual harassment (Sperling, 2015) and gender-stereotyped education in the family and in public schools (Fetisova, 2012; Kuchukova, 2016)

Neoliberalism and post-feminism have had a great influence of the Russian population in the last 30 years.

Neoliberalism has been defined as a not only an ideology and a form of economic politics but first of all a rationality that structures and organizes not only the actions of the rulers but also those who are below; its main characteristic is the generalization of competition as a norm of conduct and the company/business as a model of subjectivation (Laval & Dardot, 2013).

Neoliberalism is the “*reason of the modern capitalism*” and is assumed as a historical construction as well as a general norm of life; it is defined as a set of

discourses, practices and mechanisms that organize the governance of men via the concept of competition (Laval & Dardot, 2013). Post-feminism is therefore a direct result of neoliberalism, and of the savage capitalism that was installed in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Post feminism has been defined by the following characteristics: “ femininity as a bodily property; a shift from objectivation to subjectivation; an emphasis on self-surveillance and discipline; a focus on choice, individualism and empowerment; the crucial role of a ‘makeover’ paradigm; the celebration of ‘natural’ sexual difference; a sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill,2007, cited by Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). In post-Soviet Russia, neoliberalism and post-feminism reunite and are domesticated through pseudo-psychological literature aimed at women (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015), famous women bloggers specialized in femininity and men attraction (such as Mila Levchuk, [www.milalevchuk.ru](http://www.milalevchuk.ru))(*Mila Levchuk*, n.d.) and various on and offline “schools of femininity” which teach women how to make a man fall in love with them and/or not cheat and leave the family and how to be a good wife (Alieva & Labutina, 2020).

Salmenniemi & Adamson (2015) argue that “the domestication of post-feminism crucially involves a domestication of neoliberal capitalism in Russia”. Indeed, neoliberalism seeks to give importance to the self-monitoring, responsible optimising and maximizing subject (Ong, 2006; Rose, 1998, cited by Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015) and extends the logic of markets to other spheres of private life (Harvey, 2005, cited by Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). Women are therefore advised to cultivate their persona in order to become a valuable feminine subject, through a large amount of labour. Women are constantly advised to become better wives, lovers and professional workers. This never-ending project of self improvement includes the labour of personality, the labour of femininity and the labour of sexuality (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). Furthermore, there is a controversy between the concept of an independent woman, who is advised to work and be successful in the competitive labour

market (a strong marker of neoliberalism) and the traditional mother role, even though maternity is downplayed and the obligation of maternal care shifts from children to men, who are described as in need of constant care, rather like small children and a “lower species” (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015).

The demographic situation in Russia is not only dramatic because of the extremely low expectancy of life (72.7 years in 2021) (*Macrotrends*, n.d.) , but also because of the great gap between the life expectancy of men and women (the highest in the world) : 11.6 years in 2015 (WHO, 2015a, cited by Kossova et al., 2020). Studies have demonstrated that the life expectancy gap between men and women is directly linked with the consumption of alcohol and tobacco by men (Kossova et al., 2020). Furthermore, the gender disbalance in the Russian population has been present since WW2 (Brainerd, 2017) and has heavily affected the general attitude of women towards marriage and child-bearing. These demographic facts have been a fertile ground for a neoliberalist competition behaviour in the society, with women constantly competing in order to obtain a man and get married, which is considered as the ultimate level of success by most of the Russian society. Russian post-feminism therefore represents a paradox, as, on the one hand it domesticates the postfeminist idea of an emotionally and economically independent women, while at the same time promoting the idea of a Russian spirit of traditional “collectivism” (as opposed to Western egocentrism) and the requirement to prioritize the needs of male partners (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015).

Even though feminism is mainly absent from Russian media and politics (unless if it is represented in a comical, negative light) and Feminist Studies are rather called Gender studies (Voronina, 2009), even though they also lack popularity and the term gender is often misunderstood and considered as something foreign to Russian culture and dangerous for the traditional society. Furthermore, a general lack of knowledge about feminism, stereotypes and myths in the general knowledge of Russians define feminism as a destructive

force, which unites marginal and “not normal” women in it (Kovalenko, 2011). It is also usually associated with a general hatred towards men (Jelnikova, 2003). It is common to see such ideas expressed in media, books, and television. Such opinions are typical for right-wing political groups, as well as the religious and main state discourse of the Kremlin, but they also represent the general attitude towards feminism in the Russian society. Popular anti-feminist books, such as for example A. Nikonov’s “*The end of feminism. What is the difference between a woman and a human being?*” (Nikonov, 2007) or articles and blog posts about the dangers of feminism, the need to return to traditional values and femininity as for example Y. Magarshak’s “*The right to femininity*” (Magarshak, 2012) are extremely common on Russian Internet and media.

Nevertheless, in the last 10 years some advances have been made and the feminist movement has been growing in Russia, mostly thanks to social media and a general awareness (the MeToo movement for example) that has reached Russia as well. Feminist action in Russia is local, and there is no unique chain of a feminist movement in the country (Kovalenko, 2011). Most feminist actions take place in big cities such as Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, and the feminist organizers communicate their ideas and future actions via social media. Kovalenko (2011) argues that most feminist platforms on the internet can be characterized by their openness, variety of materials, quotes and discussed topics. The Russian feminist movement can be separated in three branches: unformal women feminist organisations for developing feminist consciousness, official organizations created to solve current social problems, and academic feminism. Nevertheless, the participants of the three groups rarely interact, and this results in the absence of a general united movement. Moreover, feminist ideology is interpreted differently by different members of these groups, that can be separated in liberal and radical feminists, which results in disagreements and alters the consolidation of a strong feminist movement (Kovalenko, 2011).

The main topics of importance for Russian feminists are reproduction rights, gender violence, general inequality between women and men and activism. As

in Western feminism, there are some disagreements between radical and liberal feminists on issues such as reproduction rights (abortion), prostitution and the general gender equality in Russian society. From my point of view, radical feminism can be defined as more popular in Russia, partly because of the great inequalities between men and women in the Russian society, the Russian machismo (“*muzhik*”) culture that had reached its apogee after Putin’s election, the constant increase of gender violence, and the general insecurity that women face. Because the oppression on women is greater in Russian society than in other Western countries radical feminism is seen by many feminists as the sole solution to the problem, as it is also the case in other highly patriarchal Latin American countries (Barbara, 2020).

In her study on modern Russian feminism, Kovalenko (2011) identifies three “situations” that result in Russian women becoming, and identifying as feminists : family education with equality between gender roles present between the parents; contradiction between the woman’s main interest and what was expected from her depending on her gender (wanting to perform activities/jobs reserved for men), a cultural break of scheme due to a foreign experience (trip to other country, comparison with one’s own culture).

The main ideas of all Russian feminist groups are the concept of sisterhood, the fight against the state (“*vlast'*”-power) which is present at all levels of the Russian society and is heavily patriarchal, and speech as an act of opposition (“*Silence is Violence*” slogan) (Kovalenko, 2011).

In the recent years, many internet bloggers have self-identified as feminists (an act of courage given the situation in Russia) and have supported and joined various protest actions after cases of extreme gender violence, juridical injustice and other society issues, from a feminist ethics point of view. In the last years, various “MeToo” movements have taken place, with women testifying cases of gender violence, rape and harassment from Russian celebrities. Other hashtags such as #мне\_нужна\_гласность (I Need Openness, or I Need Public Attention) and #янехотелаумирать (I Didn’t Want to Die) followed up as

the situation for women in Russia is getting worse. According to Russian government statistics, at least 40,000 women are affected by domestic violence each year, and at least 12,000 women are dying at the hands of their male abusers annually (Roache, 2019). Feminist action is therefore seen as a necessity by more and more women, and it is being supported by famous “million” Instagram bloggers such as Aleksandra Mitroshina, Tatiana Nikonova and Alena Popova (Roache, 2019).

Nevertheless, as Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian regime is taking steps backwards concerning human rights constantly, such public outcry did not influence the recent changes in the Russian constitution, as for example the 2019 law decriminalizing domestic violence that does not cause serious injury (“serious” being defined as one that requires hospital treatment). Furthermore, there are no laws protecting women from workplace sexual harassment (Roache, 2019) or specific gender violence laws that would protect the victims from their perpetrator.

As Roache (2019) states in her article, the culture of victim blaming due to the traditional patriarchal behaviours in the Russian society as well as a strong internal misogyny is still very present, and women are prone to “victim-blame” other women for not having chosen the right man in their life or for having “provoked” an aggressive behaviour towards them. Most gender violence victims do not report the abuse, because of the fear of public negative response and harassment. An example of this phenomenon can be observed in the case of 16-year-old Diana Shurygina, a rape survivor made celebrity in 2017, who participated in a popular talk-show in order to testify about her rape and was victim-blamed and harshly shamed by the public for her behaviour. Her narrative of the events had been constantly dissected for credibility (Rajagopalan, 2019) and she was insulted and booed by the public. Nevertheless, social media platforms

allowed her to create supporter groups, and an emergence of empathetic publics in the internet had helped her gain popularity (Rajagopalan, 2019). Despite, and because of the constant threats that feminist activists receive, and the more and more restrictive laws introduced in order to punish protesters or reinstall more traditional and patriarchal mores in the Russian society (Roache, 2019) Russian feminists continue their fight, by creating new awareness material, organizing marches, pickets and protests, and resisting the authoritarian regime by all means.

## **10. Conclusion**

From my point of view, Russia is today in a turning point of its modern history. Hatred and rejection to all Soviet-related concepts has disappeared for the new generation of the 20-30-year-olds who have lived their whole life under the authoritarian governance of Vladimir Putin, and feminism has a chance of consolidating itself as an important social movement in the Russian society.

It is nevertheless important to consider the error of Marxist revolutionaries, who did not take in account the social reproduction work of women. Nancy Fraser argues that : “Unwaged social reproductive work is necessary to the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value, and the functioning of capitalism as such” (Fraser, 2017 cited in Battacharya et al., 2017). However, this aspect of reproduction work is not only common to capitalism, as it existed as such under socialism in the Soviet Union. It is therefore important to consider the intersectionality of oppression, and recognize the importance of gender oppression per se, which will not disappear with the disappearance of class, as the Marxists had supposed. The Soviet experience demonstrates the

complicated way in which the public and the private sphere interact, as well as the cost of ignoring this (Scott, 1982).

A strong opposition movement is growing in Russia today, and, despite the neoliberal and capitalist mentality of most of the population, some feminist groups and activists are questioning the situation of the country as well as its possible future. Patriarchy is being recognized as the root of the problem, and many young Russian women self-identify as radical feminists.

With human rights becoming scarcer and the authoritarian regime controlling the citizens more and more, political action of the people is necessary. A feminist consciousness is becoming increasingly gained by the younger generation via social media and women recognize the need of such a movement in the Russian society. It is therefore of primary importance to recognize the need of a feminist approach to the situation in Russia, and analyse the direct link between authoritarian regimes and gender roles, as it is crucial (Johnson J; Saarinen, 2013). Voronina (2009) states that it is evident that it will not be possible to solve the problems of gender inequality and overcome the structural discrimination against women without the development of feminist ideas in Russia (Voronina, 2009) . Hopefully, more feminist action and a further development of a feminist consciousness in a greater number of Russian women, as well as a general opposition to the authoritarian regime and a change of government may represent a chance of change in the future.

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