

Putting Gender Back on the Policy Agenda: Gender Equality and Political Participation in the Russian Federation

The involvement of women in the political process in Russia needs to be encouraged and promoted for the good of both Russian political culture and society at large.

By Zarine Rocha
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Over fifteen years since the demise of the Soviet Union, the political participation of women remains a significant challenge in post-Soviet Russia. The markedly unequal political representation and participation of women and men in the Russian Federation provide important insights into gender relations and equality in contemporary Russian society and indicate that this issue is far from resolved. The decline and continuing low levels of women's involvement in political decision-making since 1991 have serious implications for Russian political culture and wider society, and need to be prominently placed on the Russian policy agenda. Present-day gender relations in the Russian Federation, as in the other post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, have evolved from a peculiar combination of factors, reflecting a contradictory history of empowerment and repression, and setting post-socialist transition countries apart from both consolidated democracies and countries transitioning to democracy in other contexts. According to Robert Moser in his 2001 article "The Effects of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation in Post-Communist States" in the journal *Electoral Studies*, gender roles and relations in the Russian Federation present a noteworthy paradox, with high levels of socio-economic gender equality, including educational achievements standing in stark contrast to the low levels of women represented in positions of political power.

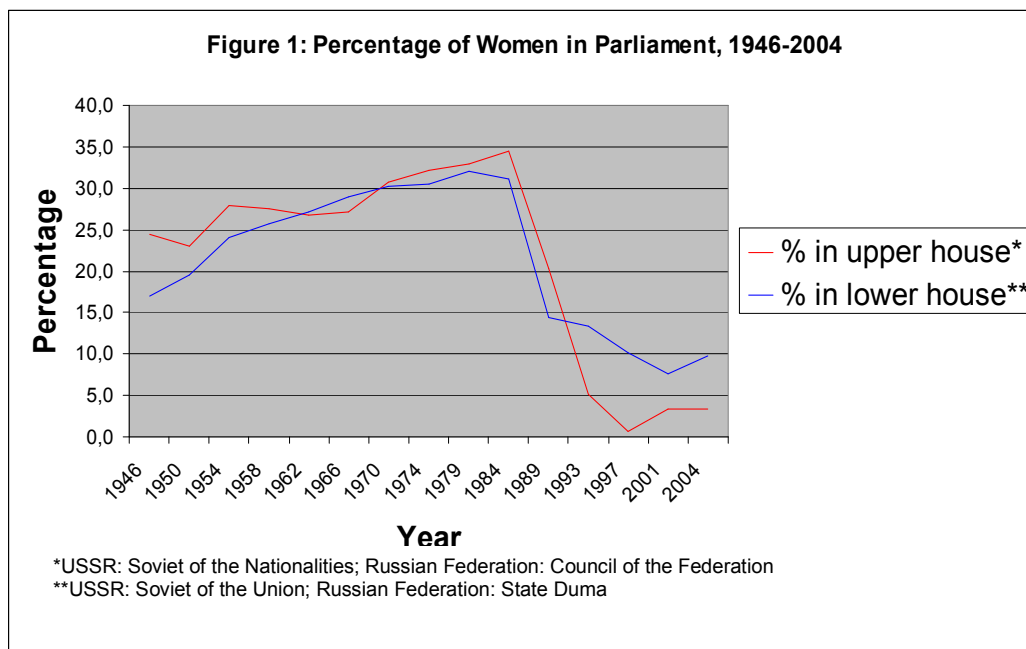
Locating women in Russia's democratic transition illuminates both the process of democratization itself, and the more deeply ingrained gender roles and social expectations. Gender balance in democratic representation is an important indicator of democratic progress, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union 2006 paper "Women in Politics: 60 Years in Retrospect," since a genuine democratic process cannot exist without the equal participation of men and women. A key measure of democratic legitimacy is thus the representation and participation of women in democratic institutions. Parliamentary representation of 30 percent is commonly seen as the threshold after which women are able to participate meaningfully in politics. The UNDP 1995 Human Development Report "Gender and Human Development" indicates that the last decade has seen a four-fold increase in the number of countries achieving this "critical mass," although the global average of 17 percent female representation is still far from true parity.

Gender and Democracy in the Russian Context

The sudden decline in the parliamentary representation of women in Russia and other Central and Eastern Europe countries after 1991, and the continuing low levels over the past sixteen years, contrast with what was the general trend of gradual increase of female representation in the Soviet Union. The political transition to a competitive, multi-party system caused the numbers of women in parliament to plummet. With the quotas of the Soviet era abolished, the numbers of women in the new political system

dropped from well above the 30 percent critical mass to 5 percent in the Federation Council and 13 percent in the State Duma.

The past decade has seen little improvement in terms of gender balance. The composite party Women of Russia initially gained popularity in the emerging political scene of the early 1990s, making up over half of the 13 percent of women in the Duma in the 1993 elections. However, by 1995, the party had lost significant support, and running independently, failed to clear the 5 percent threshold required for participation, according to Valerie Sperling’s 1996 article “‘Democracy without Women is not Democracy’ – the Struggle over Women’s Status and Identity during Russia’s Transition’, published in *Identities in Transition – Eastern Europe and Russia after the Collapse of Communism*. Although women make up over 65 percent of all federal public servants, Russian political culture is predominantly male-oriented. According to a 2005 report from the United Nations Development Programme’s Russia office, few women are in decision-making positions in government, with no women among the heads of the Federal Agencies or Federal Services, and just two, recently appointed, in the cabinet. The Russian Federation is currently ranked at 100 out of 189 in the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s world classification of women in national parliaments.



Sources: *Women in Parliaments 1945-1995: A World Statistical Survey*, IPU, 1995; IPU Statistical Archive: Women in National Parliaments <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm>

Answering “The Woman Question”

A combination of factors and circumstances has had an impact on the political participation of women in Russia, and the continuing low numbers of women in the Russian parliament. It is important to note that although aspects of the current political situation in Russia reflect a distinct departure from Soviet conditions, many of the contemporary challenges facing women are rooted in the Soviet legacy. Despite the high levels of female literacy, workforce participation and political representation, the political power of women in the Soviet Union was largely

superficial. Regardless of guaranteed seats for women at the local, republic and all-union levels, women had very little actual decision-making power. According to Moser and Sperling, real political power was concentrated less in the Soviet of the Nationalities and the Soviet of the Union, and more in the Central Committee and the male-dominated Politburo. The post-Soviet trend of democratization with minimal female participation thus reflects a well-established pattern of power concentration.

The social position of post-Soviet women in Russia is equally influenced by a powerful backlash against Soviet ideals, including those of women's emancipation and equality. The drive to distance the current Russian process of democratization from the communist past included the portrayal of women as unnaturally "over-emancipated," giving weight to traditionalist and nationalist sentiment that a woman's place is in the home. The pervasiveness of these sentiments can be seen in the higher numbers of women politically involved in traditionally "female" sectors and government ministries, including social protection and the family.

The relatively new and uncertain nature of Russian democracy is also a key factor in the lack of women's involvement in politics. It is possible that given the lack of space for independent organization under Soviet rule, more time is needed to allow women to fully participate in the developing democratic process. However, these initial electoral outcomes are not encouraging. Although low female representation may be a function of the developing nature of Russian democracy, setting a precedent of a male-dominated political system could create an exclusionary pattern for future elections and consolidation of democratic institutions.

Putting Gender back on the Russian Policy Agenda

With the next parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2007, and the Millennium Development Goals passing the halfway point, the importance of a meaningful gender-inclusive political process needs to be highlighted. In stark contrast to the Soviet focus on gender relations and the role of women, gender in post-Soviet Russia has not played a prominent role in political organization, despite the state's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the equality of rights, freedoms and opportunities laid out in the constitution. State policy set targets for female participation in political bodies throughout the 1990s, but any initial activity has noticeably diminished in the past decade. The 2002-2003 Gender Strategy of the Russian Federation is yet to be approved, and the lack of gender-related policy activity reflects both the current lack of government interest and the need for further research on the gendered consequences of current policies and reforms, the UNDP report notes.

Political participation and representation is an important issue to be addressed with the aim of achieving gender equality on a wider scale, and any progress will be closely linked with both social and economic shifts affecting women and men. A primary goal as Russia emerges from this transitional phase would be to provide equality of opportunity for both men and women to participate in the political process, shifting the image of politics as primarily the domain of men. As well as opportunity, equality of outcome is key in constructing an inclusive political process, involving greater numbers of women in government, and particularly in positions of power. The empowerment of civil society could also provide less formal avenues for political

engagement, in tandem with the promotion of equality in the formal political sector. Civil society has proven particularly important in the Russian case, since although formal politics tends to be male-dominated, civil society activity since 1991 has increasingly involved greater numbers of women, despite the growing constraints on informal organization and activity.

With a highly educated and diverse population, the Russian Federation has great human potential, and the promotion of a more gender-equitable society could maximize this potential. In order for real change to occur, however, social and political top-down initiatives from the government need to complement the diversity of civil society activities on the ground. As demonstrated by the Soviet experience, the consolidation of democracy needs to be accompanied by real and lasting social change – although greater representation of women in parliament is necessary to promote gender equality, this is not sufficient in and of itself. There is thus significant potential for future research to inform policy in this field, re-examining the position, image and priorities of women and men in Russian society, while recognizing the breaks and continuities with the history of the past century. In order for post-Soviet democracy to be effective for all citizens, both men and women need to be involved at all levels, creating a truly inclusive and participatory political process.

Zarine Rocha works at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), for the Programme on Identities, Conflict and Cohesion.