TITLE: REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT ACTIVISM IN RUSSIA

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REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT ACTIVISM IN RUSSIA

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Abstract

Women's movement activism in Russia often has the support of international feminists. In this paper we compare participants in five seminars led by an American activist and Russian collaborator in five regional locations: Tver, Ekaterinburg, Cheboksary, Novocherkassk, and Izhevsk. We placed these participants in three broad types: "veterans" of the Soviet women's councils (zhensovet), self-identified feminists, and a majority in the middle. Representation of these types of women in each of the regional seminars differed, reflecting both the real characteristics of each city and the background and choices of the site coordinator in each region.

The strongest regional contrast was between Tver and Cheboksary, with autonomous feminists dominating the proceedings in Tver, and veterans of the zhensovet dominating in Cheboksary. Izhevsk was distinctively dominated by supporters of the Women of Russia bloc. Despite these differences, there was unanimous agreement that sexual inequality is a serious problem for women in Russia today, and near unanimous agreement for the need to develop an independent women's movement. While women from Tver and Cheboksary seemed more interested in women's movement groups, the participants in Novocherkassk and Izhevsk were more focused on party politics. The participants in Cheboksary were more likely than others to believe that women were essentially different from men, and therefore belonged in politics in order to raise moral standards and clean up "dirty" politics. The women in Ekaterinburg were less politically engaged than those at other sites.

We suggest that the women's movement develops quite differently in cities in which the leading activists are academics with ties to Western feminist scholars than in regions in which the leading activists have little previous experience with the West. In the former case, there is less belief in women's essential difference from men and greater effort to develop civil society rather than merely supporting women's candidates and using electoral politics to reinstate a safety net for women and children. In both types of cities, however, activists are sincerely interested in affiliating with national and international women's organizations, such as the International Federation of University Women, and the women's East/West Network. Differences in movement development concern timing and priorities, not mutually exclusive strategies.

Nearly all activists stressed the need for establishing the "rule of law" in Russia, as a prerequisite for achieving any substantive goals for women as women. These seminars, designed to teach political organizing skills for women, seem to be effective in all regions as one strategy of Western support for the development of civil society in Russia.
I. Project Overview: 1994 - 1996

In 1994, the principal investigators began a multi-methodological, longitudinal study of women's activism in Russia. Data was gathered primarily by studying a project, "Russian Political and Civic Forums," designed by Sarah Harder (University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire) and supported by National Peace Foundation funds from the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Eurasia Foundation. The Forums were organized by Harder (past president of the American Association of University Women and current Vice-President of the International Association of University Women) and a Russian partner organization, Prolog, directed by Olga Bessolova. Thus far, twelve Forums have been held throughout Russia. The data presented here were gathered at eight of these three-day seminars during 1995 and 1996. We gathered data during two seminars in Zhukovsky, one in Obninsk, and one in each of the following cities: Cheboksary (in the ethnic Republic of Chuvashia), Tver, Novocherkassk, Izhevsk, and Ekaterinburg. The seminars in Zhukovsky and Obninsk brought together women from various outlying regions with local residents; the other seminars were for women living in those regions. In each seminar an expert team consisting of Sarah Harder, an invited American women's movement consultant, and four or more Moscow-based women's movement activists also took part. Some of the seminars included additional invited speakers, either American (e.g. from various funding agencies) or Russian (e.g. politicians and political analysts). The purpose of these seminars was to develop a "women's agenda" in each region that could be implemented by a coalition of women's groups. The techniques advanced in the seminars involved media relations, lobbying elected officials and coalition building.

The Data

Research associates attended each seminar and took extensive field notes, taped and transcribed the recordings, held focus group discussions about feminism and discrimination, and fielded the surveys designed for this research. In this paper, we rely on field note data and transcriptions from focus group discussions and the seminars themselves, and the quantitative survey data. We have a survey sample size of 132 women total. The research associates were given much latitude in deciding how to implement the research design, given the challenges of collecting data in regions far from Moscow (including broken xerox machines and participants who came and went because of other obligations).

For this reason, certain components of the design were not completed at every single site. For example, only survey data was collected at one seminar by Harder (Izhevsk). The audiotapes from three sites (Ekaterinburg, Novocherkassk, and Zhukovsky in 1996), were never provided to us by the seminar leaders. In Ekaterinburg, participants were not available in the evenings for focus groups. Due to time constraints imposed by the seminar leaders, we were not able to run focus groups in Tver, Obninsk or the second seminar in Zhukovsky, or to gather quantitative data at Obninsk. In the end, we have field notes
from six seminars, taped transcripts of the seminars from three sites, focus groups transcripts from three sites, and survey data from six regions.

The Women Participants

Perhaps the most remarkable success of these seminars was the sample of actively engaged Russian women leaders who attended. Academics were best represented, with participants from scientific centers in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Tver, Zhukovsky, the Urals, Kharkov (Ukraine) and elsewhere. There were significant numbers of engineers, teachers and journalists, and women in medical and social service fields, mostly physicians and psychologists. In addition, in every region, invited speakers and short-term participants included members of the City and State legislatures and women in municipal administration.

The participants at these seminars were not representative of Russian women. They were a highly educated elite of predominantly professional women, virtually all involved, often in leadership positions, in at least one civic organization. Many of the women were members, even leaders, in several. These 132 women represented more than fifty organizations. The gender-focused organizations varied dramatically, ranging from umbrella organizations (e.g. Ural Association of Women), local autonomous women’s groups (e.g. Women’s Light, in Tver), zhensovety (soviet-era women's councils, e.g. Union of Women of Sverdlovsk), autonomous groups which stem from zhensovety (e.g. Prolog), and academic feminist groups (e.g. Kharkov Center for Gender Studies). Twelve different charity and social services groups were represented, ranging from the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, to the Popular Movement for Sobriety, to the Humanitarian Institute. Six business-focused groups were represented including the Romashko Fund (Moscow) and several Confederations of Business Women from different regions. There were also a few explicitly political groups (e.g. Women for a New Russia, in Tver), ecological groups (e.g. YuMAN from the Chuvash region), book clubs (e.g. the Society of Book Lovers, in Tver) and youth groups (e.g. Vesta, in Ekaterinburg).

II. Defining "Feminism" and the "Women's Movement."

It is important to distinguish between feminism as an international social movement and the women's movement as a broader, more inclusive, mobilization of women. As one of the participants in the Zhukovsky seminar (1996) articulated nicely, “The whole women's movement isn't covered by feminism, it's broader than that.” The defining feature of feminism is the focus on changes in women's social status — access to economic resources, power to affect decisions in the community as a whole, and autonomy in relation to personal life choices. “Women's movements” refer to women who are motivated as women to work on issues that they view as particularly important, such as ecology, health, de-industrialization, poverty or peace, and by definition, involve a collective mobilization of women as social and political actors. Feminist groups, that is, those that are concerned with gender relations as a
target of social and political change, are but one part of the women’s movement.

A Typology of Activist Identities

In these seminars, nearly all participants could be readily classified as part of the women’s movement, in that they were already active in one or more organizations of women with social and political change goals. We see these participants as divided into three basic types.

The first type, a minority of the seminar participants (especially strongly represented in Chuvashia, but present in all the seminars) had a strong self-definition as “long-term activists in the women’s movement” by which they meant the zhensovety, the women’s organizations created and integrated into the Soviet system, and controlled by the Communist Party. At least some of the zhensovet veterans still viewed the old system and the former style of zhensovet organization quite positively, and were still primarily engaged in working in these groups.

By contrast, a second type of participant did not consider the zhensovet to be part of the women’s movement, because of the zhensovet relationship to the Soviet Women’s Committee, perceived as a communist-party coopted organization, and because of its hierarchical form of organization. This type of activist came to the seminars primarily from Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Tver, and often represented explicitly feminist organizations. In most cases, these women were affiliated with Centers for Gender Studies or nascent Women’s Studies Programs at universities. These centers include a number of mostly young women with no experience in the zhensovet at all, many of whom self-identify as feminists, and most of whom are active only in autonomous women’s movement organizations. The self-identified feminists were openly disparaging of the zhensovet, seeing them as “top down” groups, and had explicitly created new organizations “without hierarchy,” in opposition to the zhensovet style of organization. These new style feminist organizations were founded by academics who had read, and were influenced by, Western feminist writings well before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is only this type, a minority of the seminar participants, that were clearly concerned with gender relations as a target of social and political change.

The third type of participant falls between these two extremes, neither entirely committed to the old-style zhensovet organization nor fully identified with feminism. They were particularly represented in umbrella organizations of women, in service organizations helping women and in women’s NGOs that run the gamut of civic concern. Some of the participants who fit in this middle type have worked in the zhensovet but are now also founders or members of autonomous women’s groups, business women’s groups and chapters of national/international women’s groups such as the Russian Association of University Women. Others were never active on women’s issues before but have recently been mobilized by the economic and social crisis. Many of those in this category have less strong identities as women’s movement activists than do the other two types, being neither “long-term veterans of the women’s movement” nor “feminists.” The majority of the seminar participants were of this third type.
III. Overview of the Survey Findings

Most of these women were self-consciously part of the intelligentsia and particularly aware of the disadvantages their class is suffering under the form of market capitalism currently in practice (one described it as “cave [man] capitalism”). Many pointed to the high rate of unemployment among women with higher education as particularly outrageous. Based on the survey data, we see over half (56%) as very aware of sexual inequality (they agreed with three or more of these statements: that women are less recognized than men, that women face discrimination in elections, that discrimination against women is not due to women's preferences, and that discrimination is due to social organization). Ninety-six percent women agreed with at least two of the above statements, indicating a near universal awareness of sexual inequality in contemporary Russia among the women who attended these seminars.

The issue on which the participants were most divided among themselves, and on which the American trainers were themselves very ambiguous, was whether women's movements--indeed feminism itself--should be based on women's distinctiveness, their “essential” feminine values. We refer to this view of women's movements as “maternalist,” as it lays claim to special insights and issues, based on women's role as mothers. There was open disagreement among the participants in the seminars (with women interrupting each others’ statements) and seriously conflicting opinions in our survey data as to whether women are “naturally” created for motherhood and domesticity. Nearly half (46%) of the women who answered these questions on our survey agreed with at least one of the following statements in an “essentialism” index: that child care was more appropriate for women; that housework was more appropriate for women; that it was better for Russian society for women to make a home and care for children; that the most important thing for a wife to do was to please her husband; that employed mothers cannot give their children as much warmth and security as non-employed women; and that by nature, women are happiest when making a home and caring for children. Slightly more than a third (35%) of the participants disagreed with every one of these statements, and so can be classified as social constructionists who do not believe that women's role is necessarily defined by domestic responsibilities. The rest (12%) agreed with every one of the statements; we interpret this small group of women as “essentialists,” true believers in biologically based sex differences.

These women shared a basic belief that women should become politically involved. Over half the survey sample (58%) agreed with all four of these pro-political involvement statements (which, together, constitute our “political involvement” index): politics is very important to me; a great deal of attention is needed to women in politics as an issue; both women and men should be elected to the position of Deputy to the State Duma; both women and men should be national leaders. Nearly everyone else agreed to at least some of those statements, and only one woman disagreed with all of them. Four out of five (82%) agreed that women should organize an independent movement to eradicate sex-based discrimination.
Another important finding from our survey data was that the support for the Women of Russia bloc had been quite significant among these participants in 1993 but had fallen dramatically since then. Our findings indicate that about half (52%) the participants had voted for the Women of Russia bloc in 1993. However, when asked how many currently believed that the bloc was effective, only 30% agreed. Similarly, when asked if the Women of Russia bloc represented women in parliament, less than a third (28%) believed they did. Those who did support the bloc were slightly more likely to prioritize factors affecting the quality of daily life such as social services, consumer goods and housing. Otherwise, they held no significantly different attitudes from other participants, including their likelihood of seeing women as essentially different from men, support for women’s political involvement, or awareness of gender inequality.

IV. Regional Differences

The regional seminars differed in composition from each other, in part reflecting real characteristics of the city and in part reflecting the background and choices of the person who was the site coordinator in each city. However, in the field notes it was clear that there were zhensovet activists at each site, except Tver, and there were autonomous activists at each place, too, as well as individuals who fell in the broad middle category. Thus, despite the differences between the site-coordinators and regional situations, we did achieve samples that may be fruitfully compared with one another. We analyze data from five seminars in this section: Cheboksary, Ekaterinburg, Novocherkassk, Izhevsk and Tver. The activists who gathered for the seminars near Moscow -- in Obninsk and Zhukovsky-- were from all over Russia (some were even from the Ukraine and Belarus). Because these seminars represented multiple regions and countries, they are not relevant to the discussion in this section.

The most stark contrast between regions was that between Tver and Cheboksary. Tver is a city with extensive Western contacts since 1991 and was the site of a feminist summer school in 1996. The site coordinator is a founder of an autonomous women's project, a frequent traveler to American and German feminist conferences, and a self-identified feminist academic. By contrast, in Cheboksary, the seminar organized by Harder and Bessolova represented the first Western political intervention (e.g. seminar or training session) in that city. The site coordinator in Cheboksary is the founder of the Chuvashian region's branch of the Russian Association of University Women, but her background differs radically from that of the Tver site coordinator. The Cheboksary coordinator is currently living and working in Moscow, is associated with the Public Administration Academy, and is working on a law degree in the hopes of running for the State Duma. Ekaterinburg, Izhevsk and Novocherkassk fell between the two poles represented by the more autonomous Tver groups and the more zhensovet-oriented style of activism that was strongly represented at Cheboksary. Ekaterinburg was somewhat closer to the Tver case in the extent of prior Western contact, although the Ekaterinburg site coordinator
also now lives in Moscow and the level of overall awareness of problems and commitment to women's social and political change was notably lower in Ekaterinburg than in Tver.

In Tver, the positive aspects of learning from the West were emphasized and the seminars valued for what they could show women about shared leadership, non-hierarchical organizing and consciousness raising. According to statements made by participants in the seminar, intellectual freedom and the ability to travel were particularly valued aspects of Russia's economic and political transition, and, while the extent of social problems that also resulted were in no way minimized, the way the participants framed the transition emphasized women's empowerment and opportunities for influence. This was a city in which there were already many established small autonomous feminist organizations, annual "women's weeks," and the beginning of a Women's Studies Program.

Only 20% of the participants at Tver were currently supporters of the Women of Russia bloc, making Tver's participants, along with those in Ekaterinburg (at 18%), distinctively less favorably disposed to Women of Russia than were the activists at other sites (where support ranged from 40% to 95%). As mentioned above, this does not mean that these participants were not aware of sexual inequality or committed to political involvement on women's behalf. In fact, three-quarters (74%) were in the survey category of highest support for women in politics (endorsing all four items), two-thirds were in the highest category of seeing a need for social change and over half (52%) were in the highest category of awareness of inequality. They were unlikely to see women as essentially different from men (only 12%). More of these women (68%) prioritized support for labor force equality than prioritized daily quality of life issues such as social services, housing, and consumer goods (42%). It is distinctive that some women in Tver did not put a priority on domestic issues at all (five women or 20%).

The focus of discussion in Cheboksary was more directed by the "long-term activists in the women's movement" (i.e. by leaders of the zhensovet) and, perhaps not surprisingly, these activists were more willing to define the overall transition in Russia as unrelievedly negative, and to see women as potentially benefitting from a complete reversal of economic course. Western influences were more often cast as destructive, in terms of crime and sexual exploitation of women. More women in Cheboksary than in Tver currently supported the Women of Russia bloc (39%), although this is considerably less than the support the party enjoyed from participants in Novocherkassk and Izhevsk. The variation in level of support for the bloc does not relate to a greater or lesser awareness of sexual inequality or desire for social change than that present in Tver (in both sites about half the participants were highly aware of inequalities and about two-thirds strongly endorsed social change on behalf of women), but the women in Cheboksary were more essentialist and more ambivalent about women's political roles (only about half, 44%, scored at the highest level of political involvement on our aforementioned index), compared to three-quarters or 74% in Tver). They were more likely than women in any other region to see women as essentially different then men (35% answered every question in the
The seminar in Ekaterinburg seemed to be the least effective, in that a "woman's agenda" was never actually completed. The participants seemed less committed to the process, and many came and went sporadically. The participants in this site, like those in Tver, were not often supporters of the Women of Russia bloc. Only 18% (two women) were current supporters. But these participants were also less strongly committed to women's political involvement (47%) or to a need for social change for women generally (53%) than the Tver women. However, they were more similar to the participants in Tver than in Cheboksary in that relatively few (20%, or three women) responded consistently that women were essentially different than men. These women placed equal priority on quality of domestic life issues (e.g. housing, social services and consumer goods) and on the need for labor force equality, thereby locating their responses on these substantive issues midway between the ends of the spectrum represented by Tver and Cheboksary.

The women at the Novocherkassk seminar seemed to be particularly concerned with the differences between the American and Russian contexts, and were more skeptical than women at the other sites about the use of American techniques on Russian soil. The participants at this site were still more likely than those at Cheboksary, Tver or Ekaterinburg to be current supporters of the Women of
Russia bloc (65%), and as a group the women at this site were most likely of all to strongly support social change on behalf of women (84% supported all the survey items related to this issue). However, they were not especially likely to score at the highest level on our political involvement index. Unlike the situation in Cheboksary, this finding cannot be attributed to an essentialist view of women; indeed they were by far the most likely group to endorse a strongly anti-essentialist view. Sixty percent rejected all of the items asserting differences between the sexes (the next most anti-essentialist site was Tver, where 36% rejected all these items). Like the participants in Ekaterinburg and Izhevsk, they placed equal priority on quality of domestic life issues (e.g. housing, social services and consumer goods) and on the need for labor force equality, thus locating them in the middle of the spectrum on these substantive issues. Their commitment to social change on behalf of women seems to be strongly channeled toward the single political strategy of electoral politics, and their anti-essentialist views seem congruent with their commitment to struggling in party politics along with men. The women’s party strategy (pro-WOR) endorsed by a majority of these activists made them more similar to the activists in Izhevsk, and may help to explain their skepticism about the non-partisan American lobbying approach being taught at the seminars.

From Izhevsk, we have only survey data, but here too, there seemed to be -- as in Cheboksary--a clear focus on the decreased quality of life after the transition. However, the participants at this site were the most likely to be current supporters of the Women of Russia bloc (94%, only one person was not a current supporter) and their level of political involvement was as high as that in Tver (69%). This high level of political engagement probably stemmed from the fact that Galina Klimantova (who was involved with the seminar), was the Women of Russia deputy who came from Udmurtia, of which Izhevsk is the capital. However, this level of political commitment was not matched by a similarly high level of awareness of sexual inequality or of seeing a need for social change on behalf of women (only 38% supported all the inequality items on the survey, the lowest level in any site, and about half or 55% supported all the social change items, thus tying the Izhevsk participants for last place with Ekaterinburg on those indicators). Like participants everywhere but Cheboksary, there was little consistent support here for an essentialist position. They seemed, like the participants in Novocherkassk, to be activists as women rather than for women, and their ties to either the feminist or the zhensovet type of women’s movement organizing approaches seem less clear than their ties to Women of Russia and conventional, pragmatic party politics. They were as likely to prioritize support for the quality of domestic life issues (e.g. housing, social services and consumer goods) as they were to prioritize the need for labor force equality, locating them, with Ekaterinburg and Novocherkassk participants, in the middle of the spectrum between Tver and Cheboksary.

While these differences between the regional sites do exist, we must reiterate that there were more commonalities than distinctions between the activists in each region. In every region, except Tver,
women attended the seminars who had been long time activists in zhensovety, as did self-defined autonomous feminists. And in all cases, preferences for activist strategies for the future, in the form of the "women's agenda" could not be explained from previous organizational experience. In both types of cities, moreover, activists are sincerely interested in affiliating with national and international women's organizations, such as the International Federation of University Women, and the women’s East/West Network. Differences in movement development concern timing and priorities, not mutually exclusive strategies. Overall, support for the Women of Russia bloc declined, but in every region this was totally unrelated to continuing support for the need to develop an independent women’s movement.

There was also a strongly articulated desire to establish a rule, or law, or accountable state evidenced in the field-notes of each region, and activists in every region connecting their own activities in the women's movement with developing accountability in government. As one participant put it:

"...to create a basis for the rule of law... without solving this problem, without constructing a law-abiding state, women's social problems cannot be solved [but] the goal is so big that in the nearest future it cannot be attained... we should look for and take the first steps in this direction."

In the first round of dot-voting on a women’s agenda (in which participants placed a number of dots reflecting their individual priorities on an overall list of goals created from suggestions by the group), establishing the rule of law placed at or near the top in all seminars.

V. Conclusion

The seminars in every region seem to be one effective means of contributing to the development of civil society in Russia by teaching women leaders political skills, providing them with an opportunity for networking, and creating a setting in which they can further develop their identities as political actors with a “women’s agenda.” In interviews we conducted with them after the seminars, site coordinators in Tver and Cheboksary, otherwise quite different in the type of activism they practiced, were both very positive about the skills they and their fellow participants had acquired in the training. In additional, some regional participants became involved in the cross-regional seminars held in Zhukovsky and women in the Don region brought the techniques of the seminars to bear in a larger peace conference. Thus the evidence we have suggests not only that participants saw the seminars as useful but were putting their skills to use in their ongoing civic activism.
ENDNOTES

1. For a full discussion of the survey results, please refer to another report written by the authors for the National Council on Soviet and Eastern European Research titled, “Women’s Movements, Feminism and Women’s Political Activism in Russia.”

2. Seven percent of the total did not answer all of these questions, and thus were not placed in a category.