

Grassroots Women's Activism in Post-Soviet Russia: Surviving Social Change Together?

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The economic, social and political changes which have occurred in Russia over the last 10 years have had a profound effect on Russian women's lives. Economic reform has brought poverty, insecurity and high levels of anxiety and stress to large sections of the population both female and male (UNDP 1999). In addition, women have been faced with a new enthusiasm in the media, political rhetoric and public opinion, for essentialist attitudes to gender and restrictive notions of women's appropriate place and role in post-Soviet society (Attwood 1996; Sperling 1999, pp. 73-80). As a result women's position in the public sphere has been considerably undermined in terms of both political representation and access to paid employment. Many women have welcomed a move away from the excessive burdens of Soviet-style 'emancipation' which demanded both equal participation in the public sphere and primary responsibility for the family and domestic sphere from women. Yet a simple retreat into the private sphere of home and family has proved neither financially possible nor personally acceptable for large numbers of Russian women (Khotkina 1994; Mezentseva 1994; Bridger & Kay 1996). Since the early 1990s many Russian women have had to deal with new and difficult personal circumstances and have struggled to support their families and loved ones both materially and emotionally. In the face of these many challenges Russian women have shown great courage and ingenuity in developing flexible survival strategies for themselves and their families and adapting to new demands and circumstances (Kiblitckaya 2000; Bridger, Kay and Pinnick 1996). As well as struggling individually, some women have come together with others like themselves, forming grassroots women's organisations in an attempt to improve their circumstances and help each other to survive and, where possible, to prosper.

This paper is based on the findings of a study into the position of women in post-Soviet Russian society and the aims, activities and circumstances of grassroots women's organisations in the early to mid 1990s. The study involved extensive qualitative research amongst previously little-known grassroots women's organisations in Moscow and three provincial centres: Tver', Saratov and Tarusa, a small district-centre town in Kaluga region. The fieldwork for this study was carried out in 1995-96 and involved in-depth interviews with over seventy members and leaders of twelve grassroots women's organisations; participant observation at numerous seminars, meetings and events; an open-ended questionnaire survey and several group and individual interviews with a broader sample of women. This paper aims to present the circumstances surrounding the founding of these organisations, the aims which they set themselves, the ways in which they attempted to achieve those aims and their impact on the lives of their members. It will also investigate the ways in which these groups and their members positioned themselves in relation to the development of essentialist attitudes and opinions on gender within Russia on the one hand, and a dialogue with 'western' feminist theory and practice on the other.

Grassroots women's organisations as a response to social disintegration and the collapse of state structures

The ten grassroots organisations studied in most detail were diverse in many ways¹. Each of them was explicitly defined as an organisation of and for women, yet most combined this with an additional focus on a specific group or constituency of women. Several groups drew together women from a particular professional background, for example, a club for business women and an association of women lawyers, both in Saratov, and the Moscow branch of a nation-wide organisation of women in aviation, most of them pilots or ex-pilots. Other groups had formed on the basis of shared experience or life-style, a group of single mothers in Moscow for example, and a club for unemployed women in Tver'. In the smallest locality, Tarusa, there was less scope for diversity and the constituency of women from which members were drawn was defined, above all, geographically. The organisation

¹ It is not within the scope of this paper to describe each organisation in detail. Fuller information about the organisations as well as the broader findings and conclusions of the study can be found in Kay (2000).

studied was the only women's organisation active in the town, simply calling itself the Tarusa Association of Women (*Taruskoe Ob''edinenie Zhenshchin*).

The narrower focus implied by this concentration on specific constituencies of women relates closely to the circumstances surrounding the establishment of these grassroots organisations. One of the consequences of the disintegration of the former structures of the communist state has been the loss of systems of welfare provision, networks of state sponsored social organisations and local party structures. The latter certainly did not fulfil the political functions of civil society as these have frequently come to be defined, based largely on the historical experiences of protest movements, lobbying groups and organisations for the liberation of socially and culturally disadvantaged groups in the countries of North America, Western Europe and Australia² (Potucek 1999, pp. 37-8). Yet they were able at times to provide an interface between the levels of state and society. Access to welfare provisions and the redistribution of goods and services was primarily organised through the Soviet workplace. Nonetheless, social organisations such as the network of women's councils functioning under the auspices of the Soviet Women's Committee also attempted to access goods and services for their members and to help families with many children, single parents, elderly women and others in difficult circumstances (Browning 1992, pp. 106-9). Soviet citizens were also able to make modest demands on those in positions of authority and seek representation and remedy if they felt they were being unfairly treated or their rights abused or ignored. This was achieved through appeals to local trade union, party or social organisations and through writing to the local, regional or national press, which paid an important role in interceding on behalf of wronged groups or individuals and prodding the appropriate official structures to life (Riordan and Bridger 1992, pp.1-4).

The loss of such structures acting as sources of material support and channels of communication and redress has had a significant impact on a population confronted

simultaneously with poverty, insecurity and the undermining of both formal systems of law and order and more informal moral codes and modes of behaviour. In this set of circumstances the establishment of grassroots, community-based groups and organisations as a means of pooling resources and accruing collective power has a resonance with people's immediate needs and circumstances which the development of more theoretically and politically oriented structures of civil society may not have³. The 'political process model' of social movement development posits that, 'before they dawn, social movements must [...] have achieved a critical mass of individuals who recognize that the discrimination or oppression they are experiencing is a systemic, or political, problem, not a personal one, and that the rectification of the injustice is possible' (Sperling 1999, p. 44). Models such as this, developed in relation to distinctive historical, political and cultural phenomena, in this case the emergence of the American civil rights movement, fail to capture the subtleties and local significance of the Russian grassroots women's organisations studied here. They may also add to a false impression that this style of strategic and overtly political, public action has remained a priority for the majority of non governmental organisations in the countries of West Europe and North America, many of which, especially at the local level, are also largely engaged in practical activities for the material and emotional support of members.

On the whole, the grassroots women's organisations which I studied in 1995-6 had not initially been founded with a view to defending women's interests in a general, political sense. Nor did they necessarily aim to mount a direct challenge to the developing status quo of essentialist attitudes towards women and restrictive notions of women's appropriate roles and spheres of activity. Instead many of the women involved in this study had chosen to form or join an organisation on the basis of much more pragmatic, local and often

² For a critique of the universalism and ethnocentrism of concepts of 'civil society', 'democratisation' and 'transition, as these have been applied to the post-Soviet Russian context by international advisors and the authors of programmes of foreign assistance, see Hann and Dunn (1996); Verdery (1996) and Wedel (1998).

³ See Sperling (1999: 28) for a useful critique of the division of organisations into 'pragmatic' and 'strategic' categories. Despite this critique, Sperling appears to argue that the practically-oriented activities of many Russian women's organisations are redeemed by their underlying strategy rather than valuable in their own right.

personal concerns. In several cases women had come together in order to establish a form of self-help group, to pool their resources, experience and energies. This desire was often described as having been reinforced by a recognition that help and support was unlikely to be forthcoming from any external source. In Saratov the Women's League: Initiative (*Zhenskaia Liga: Initsiativa*) was engaged in a variety of activities including the promotion of women in the arts and creative work, attempts to found a centre for the social protection of children, political campaigning and assertiveness training. A founder member of the group explained, 'the fundamental reason for setting up our organisation was to help each other, because no-one else will help us'. Expressing similar sentiments, but from a more positive perspective perhaps, a member of the Tarusa Association of Women said, 'I think that the organisation is necessary and important because, well it is not only that it solves women's problems, but it also somehow combines all women's power'. In each case the kind of help implied was to be as practical and tangible as possible, focusing on the specific difficulties encountered by individual members of the group in question.

For some groups of women a sense of lacking external support and succour was directly targeted toward the Russian state. This was particularly true of members of the Moscow-based single-mothers' organisation, Just Mum (*Tol'ko Mama*), and of the women who had founded and were running a Club for Women's Initiatives (*Klub Zhenskikh Initsiativ*) for unemployed women in Tver'. Although the latter was nominally attached to the local department of the Federal Employment Service, it was officially registered as a charitable centre. The women working there saw it as very specifically separate from state mechanisms and described themselves as a counterbalance to state indifference to the plight of unemployed women and failure to offer them necessary help or support. One of the leading members of this organisation described the reasons for its inception in just such terms:

Why do we have a women's club? Well because it is characteristic for us and for Russia as a whole that the problems, well specifically women's problems, are so many, but they are not being dealt with at the state level. There is no state mechanism for dealing with and resolving these problems as there is in other countries and this is why we have a women's club. That was the idea behind its foundation.

Formed at least partly in recognition of the enormity of the problems and challenges facing women, these small, local organisations also implicitly, if not explicitly, represented a site of empowerment for women and an embodiment of their faith in their own ability to make a difference and to overcome the difficulties they faced together.

Organisations as a source of practical support and collective strength

With this perspective as a starting point many of the women who had been actively involved in the setting up of an organisation saw its main purpose as providing a source of collective strength and bargaining power for its members. In the first instance this strength in numbers was seen as a means of gaining access to and making demands on local authorities. As the leader and founder of the Tarusa Association of Women explained:

It is one thing if I go to the organs of power and make an inquiry [...] then it is all like please do this, please help and so on. This is all very well, but it is one thing when you are just an individual [...] and it is something completely different when you go as a whole organisation. One woman alone is like a single finger, but together we are an entire hand, which is much more useful.

In Tarusa this collective power had been formalised by a group of women from within the organisation who had developed a system of mutual support for any woman who had to go to court or who came into conflict with the local authorities or with her employer. Several women had been in this position as a result of making complaints against corrupt officials, claiming unfair dismissal from their jobs or fighting eviction from their flats. When each woman's case came before the courts, or if she was summoned to the offices of the official in question, the entire group would go with her, in order to ensure that she was treated with respect and that the proceedings were carried out correctly. Support of this kind was described as vital:

A group has formed of people who help each other out if in no other way than that they come to the court and are present throughout the case. What does this mean? It means that the judge will not dare to insult the person and there will be no tampering with documents because there are witnesses. It is really good and not only in this sense but also morally because the woman comes to court even for a very basic case, for instance she is getting a divorce and she has her women-friends beside her and so she feels that she has some protection.

Other women felt that the backing of an organisation not only gave them more bargaining power and protection in dealing with official structures, it also allowed them to preserve a sense of dignity and personal integrity when asking for help. This was particularly true for

those groups of women, like the single mothers in Moscow, who felt that they might be stigmatised as undeserving scroungers. The founder and president of Just Mum described the benefits of an organisation in this respect as follows:

To be honest, in some ways we are a collective of beggars. Because a woman on her own doesn't always feel able to open her mouth and ask for what she needs [...] But altogether as we are now, it is much easier to ask when you are asking for the whole group.

In this way, what many organisations offered to their members above all else was the opportunity to develop and benefit from collective survival strategies. Many of the activities in which women might engage on an individual basis in order to provide for their families and preserve their own sense of dignity and moral integrity were made less daunting or seemed more likely to be successful when undertaken as part of a co-operative and mutually supportive group. Some organisations' more ambitious ventures eventually failed: attempts to procure long-term material support from international or local sponsors or authorities, for example, or projects to establish commercial enterprises as a form of job creation. Yet the women most closely involved in the organisation and its activities often spoke of other benefits in terms of emotional support, personal empowerment and solidarity. Whilst these may not have been part of the original aims behind the setting up of many of these organisations, nor the outcome that women had necessarily sought on joining, these less immediately tangible benefits came to be no less valued by the women who enjoyed them.

Moral support, empowerment and solidarity: positive side effects if not primary aims

The power, strength and assertiveness gained by bringing together women with a shared set of experiences, problems or indeed skills might be used to achieve various ends and with a number of knock-on effects for the women involved. In Saratov the lawyers, trainee lawyers and students of law belonging to the Association of Women Lawyers (*Assotsiatsiia Zhenshchin Iuristov*) had established a centre offering free legal advice to women, especially mothers of children with disabilities, as well as pensioners, veterans and people with disabilities. The young lawyers who staffed this centre gave up their time and offered their expertise free of charge despite their own financial difficulties and the pressure of intensive studies or a demanding job, often combined with childcare and domestic duties in

the home. In interviews each of these women spoke with pride of her involvement in this voluntary work often describing in great detail cases where she felt that her input had been particularly significant or where she had been especially pleased with the outcome. The youngest member of the organisation had yet to complete her university studies but had nonetheless spent a lot of time working in the centre as a legal assistant. This young woman stated that she had been attracted to the organisation precisely because of the opportunity it offered to be involved in positive and useful activity and to make a difference to other women's lives:

I heard about the association [...] and I thought that really women in our country are faced with a mass of problems. To begin with I hadn't given that much thought to this issue, but then I realised that it really would be worth working in this organisation, that it was worth spending my time and effort on this, because there are so many problems. Women can't get jobs. Women have problems with their children. Not all women have enough money for kindergartens and crèches. And as for problems like rape and violence [...] I have realised that our country is almost totally undeveloped [in providing support for women].

Many of the grassroots women's organisations which were established in Russia in the early 1990s tended, by their very nature, to attract women experiencing just the kind of problems described by this young law student. Frequently members described their interest in joining or establishing an organisation as stemming primarily from a quest for some kind of help and support in response to a situation in which they felt unable to cope alone. This view of the organisation as a lifeline for women in crisis put considerable strain on groups with limited resources and was often particularly stressful for those women in leadership positions. Nevertheless, several groups had organised intensive support for a member going through a particularly severe crisis, for example the life threatening illness of a child, an especially traumatic divorce or a period of extreme depression. In such cases organisations did their utmost to provide the most tangible support possible which might include raising funds for medical treatment, helping with childcare or supplying food, clothing and even taking over the domestic tasks of one woman for a restricted period. A general lack of resources within organisations made up almost entirely of women already existing near the limits of their personal means, both financial and psychological, meant that such activities often could not be sustained for more than a short while. Yet for women undergoing a prolonged period of crisis, if such practical arrangements could not be kept in place, the

organisations could and did provide long-term emotional support, solidarity and informal counselling.

In either case the consequences were broader than simply helping the woman in question to get through a difficult time. The women involved in offering rather than receiving support spoke of the personal benefits to themselves in terms of an increased sense of self worth, pride in what they had achieved and renewed hope and optimism for the future. For some women who had initially been on the receiving end, one of the most important outcomes, once their personal crisis had been at least partially resolved, was the empowerment they experienced from being able to pass on similar support to others. In Tarusa, the local doctor had first come into contact with the Tarusa Association of Women during a period of extreme personal crisis surrounding her divorce. A year later with considerable material, practical and emotional support from the organisation she had turned her life around and was eager to help other women in similar situations.

I went through that divorce and it is only now that I know what it means. I survived that and suicide as well. Three years ago I didn't want to live. Tragedy followed tragedy and it all mounted up. [...] I got out of it because I had somewhere to turn and with the organisation's help I got back on my feet. Now I can offer this kind of help myself and I think that I have a duty to do this. I do help when people come to me because I have been through it myself and I know that emptiness, the dreadful emptiness.

Women who had not themselves been the recipients of such intensive support from their organisations also often spoke of the importance of being able to make a significant difference to other women's lives. The leader of Just Mum, for example, explained that a primary activity in which the organisation had recently been involved was the collection and redistribution amongst members of children's and women's clothing, food and toys received either in the form of 'humanitarian aid' from church charities, foreign embassies, individuals and organisations, or by 'recycling' clothes and toys donated by members whose children had grown out of them to those with younger sons and daughters. This had been difficult to organise, not only demanding the input of a lot of time and energy in raising support from external bodies and groups, but also involving considerable logistical problems in organising the transportation, storage and redistribution of goods. She had personally played a central role in organising this process and explained that she had

frequently been exhausted, frustrated and upset by it. Nonetheless, she also described with considerable pride the joy and satisfaction she received from being able to relieve her members from some of the ‘oppressive worries’ of seeking to provide for themselves and their children:

Yes, my life has got harder since I set up the organisation, but I also get a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction from it. For example, last year I had an experience with one Mum which really helped me. I came late and she was waiting for me with her son by the door to my building. She was in a dreadfully thin coat which didn’t suit the weather at all. Her neck was all red and I saw that she was very cold. She came to me like that, but when she left she had a different coat. She left properly dressed and I was very pleased to see this. Yesterday a woman came to see me and she was dressed almost only in clothes we’ve collected. If the organisation didn’t exist I don’t know how she’d get by, she has two daughters to raise alone.

Far from retreating into an individualistic mode of existence and dismissing communal activities and collective identities as vestiges of a defeated communist past, these women saw such strategies both as the guarantors of their collective survival and as a source of personal satisfaction and psychological well-being.

Indeed for some women this was more important than material or financial support. In Saratov one of the members of an organisation simply known as Dignity (*Dostoinstvo*) explained that she had been attracted to organisational activity by precisely such needs.

I came to join in this way, because I can’t go on just watching all that is going on around me. [...] In principal I can manage on the money I earn but my soul simply can’t bear to see all this misery [...] I just couldn’t bear to watch anymore [...] So I looked for people who would share my views, maybe some emotional support [...] I don’t want to get paid for what I do [in the organisation], for heaven’s sake it is my own choice, it is what my soul craves that’s all, to have this socially-beneficial role.

Statements such as this stand in sharp contrast to the suggestions made by some international agencies and organisations that the Russian population needs to be taught a sense of ‘social responsibility’. Those supporting this view tend also to suggest that this can only be achieved through the implementation of programmes and projects funded by West European and North American government agencies and foundations and therefore also conceived and developed in accordance with their perspectives and priorities regarding the ‘best’ path for Russia’s social and political development. A report on specialist training programmes run by the International Research and Exchanges Board, an organisation partially funded by the United States Department of State, suggests that:

one of the best ways to facilitate [a new public service ethos] is to promote the “transfer” of socially conscious individuals from NGOs [non governmental organisations] to the government. Also required is a broader sense of political responsibility among Russians – a feeling that they are responsible for their own well-being and the well-being of their society’ (Joselyn 1995, p. 16).

This sense that Russians do not possess the necessary qualities in order to demonstrate social conscience or become involved in public service work of their own accord is negated by the record of many of the organisations involved in this study. The myth is perpetuated however, in the mission statements and indeed titles of aid programmes and agencies such as the British Department of International Development’s ‘Know How Fund’ or the British Foreign Office funded ‘Marshall Plan for the Mind’. There is increasing evidence of resistance to such condescending attitudes and approaches from within Russian non governmental organisations. A recent report from workshops and plenary discussions involving activists from the Russian regions at the BEARR trust’s 2000 conference states ‘Russian NGOs want guidance on filling in application forms. Otherwise, British NGOs must listen to them, not tell them what is needed’ and calls on foreign non governmental organisations to ‘avoid patronising attitudes and a “top-down” approach.’ (*BEARR Trust Newsletter* Feb. 2001, pp. 2-3).

Challenging women’s oppression: personal empowerment or public activism?

The majority of the grassroots women’s organisations involved in this study had not been established with the aim of changing public attitudes towards women, of developing a definition of sexism or challenging social restrictions on women’s activities and aspirations per se. On the contrary, many of the women interviewed had either very little knowledge of second-wave feminist theory or viewed it as having little relevance to their experiences or to the contexts in which they and their organisations were operating. Concepts of equality and liberation were most often equated with the rather lop-sided version of women’s emancipation promoted by the Soviet state. Many respondents were quick to point out that this experience had often been oppressive rather than liberating given the pressure it placed on women to participate fully in the public sphere whilst retaining full responsibility for the family, childcare and the home. A member of Just Mum was forceful in her opinion on this point. She stressed her irritation with ‘western’ ignorance of what Soviet ‘equality’ had

meant for some women. In her view the promotion of a 'feminist' agenda of equal rights by funding bodies and international organisations working in Russia since the fall of communism was both inappropriate and insensitive in this context:

I grew up in Soviet society which strived to achieve a certain formula which we all learned by heart at university: to get rid of all differences between town and country, between intellectual and physical work, between men and women. In the end there were supposed to be no men and women anymore, just Soviet citizens. I don't want that sort of equality. I've had it up to here. People from the West just don't understand because they have never experienced it. They have never seen the terrible infringements of women's rights. [...] That wasn't equality at all, it was an infringement of a woman's right to be a woman, to realise herself as she chooses. So only people without a clue talk about women's equal rights in such absolute terms.

Despite this woman's implicit recognition that a different and preferable form of equality might be possible, she, like many others, feared the consequences of any direct public campaign for equal rights or women's emancipation. In response to the experience of Soviet policies many interviewees stated their support for a less burdensome role for women, often paying lip service to the essentialist theories promoted by the post-Soviet media and political rhetoric. Yet the ways in which they organised their own lives, the wishes they expressed for their daughters and for other women demonstrated, at the very least, an ambivalence toward the notion of a full-scale withdrawal into the private sphere or a rigid and absolute division of characteristics, roles and responsibilities into mutually exclusive female and male categories.⁴

This complex set of often contradictory attitudes presented a special challenge to those organisations, leaders or individual members who did embrace a more explicitly feminist perspective. In Tver' for example, two young women were struggling to establish a new organisation, called Step (*Stupen'*). Their specific aim was to attract younger women, in their late teens, twenties and early thirties, to an overtly feminist women's movement. They were very aware however, that this could only be successful if their approach was subtle. They believed that the best formula would be if they could combine activities having immediate relevance to and practical benefits for young women's lives, with an underlying

⁴ For a full description of the attitudes to work and public sphere activity expressed by the women of this sample, as well as their responses to essentialist gender discourses and the promotion of maternity as the 'true

agenda of consciousness raising, education, discussion of women's rights and combating sexual discrimination. With this in mind they had reviewed the skills and resources at their disposal and elaborated an ambitious but impressive plan. One young woman managed her father's warehouse and retailing enterprise, giving her access to large and relatively comfortable premises from which organisational activities could be run. The warehouses were in fact part of a block of disused apartments and she had already identified one of these empty two-room flats which could be used by the organisation free of charge. Her friend was a trained seamstress whose husband owned and ran a small fashion boutique in the centre of town. Their plan therefore was to organise vocational training in dressmaking for young women, with the possibility of a commercial outlet for the garments produced through the fashion boutique.

As the young seamstress explained, such a practical focus was not simply a way of attracting young women to their feminist agenda by stealth. It was also something which she personally viewed as a vital justification for their activities and indeed which formed the basis of her principles and beliefs:

Of course we want to do something a bit more tangible. [...] In fact it is absolutely normal, if we want women to know more about us, if we want them to think like we do then of course we have to be able to give some account of what we do and about what we do in practical terms. Because if I just say, 'Well we get together and talk for about two hours and drink tea together and then we all go home', then obviously they will say that they have better things to do than drink tea and then go home. But if we can say we have done something more practical, well it will be a help to people. It is not the most important thing that people should talk about us or about our principles, the most important thing is that women should have easier and better lives.

Nonetheless, if they could attract members in this way, they hoped simultaneously to create an environment in which consciousness raising and empowerment would occur both spontaneously and as a result of their efforts. They had acquired a computer and printer with a small start-up grant from a US-government funded organisation and planned to use this to produce pamphlets, posters and stickers with catchy feminist slogans and information about sexual discrimination and means of combating it. They were also sure that once they had gathered a critical mass of young women, discussions of issues such as

calling' of all women see Kay 2000. Similar conclusions have been drawn by other studies see for example: Bridger and Kay (1996); Bruno (1996); Bruno (1997); Dmitrieva (1996); Attwood (1996).

sexual harassment, oppressive attitudes towards women and pressure to conform to stereotypical forms of behaviour and relationships would simply arise of their own accord.

The young woman running the warehousing enterprise explained that she viewed this opportunity for young women to share experiences and viewpoints as possibly the most valuable aspect of the organisation:

Every time I talk to one of my female friends I see that for each person you need a different individual approach. [...] Basically I want it to be a club for communication and contact, so that it would be a place for people who like one another, who feel they have something in common, for women friends. All the same, no matter how or where women come into close contact with each other, these issues are raised between them and their talk always touches on the challenges and problems which are common to all women. They discuss their ways of solving them and that is the most important thing. Because I can't say that I will just tell them all what to do and it will always be right.

A similar stance was taken by women in Tarusa and Saratov who explained that whilst they personally subscribed to a feminist ideology of equal rights and equal opportunities, this was not the main agenda of their organisations and not something they felt they had any right to impose on others.

Some women felt that openly stating a commitment to feminism would be counterproductive as it might alienate other members and make it still harder for them to get a hearing. Others spoke of a general aversion to any attempt to impose a single ideology as the universal solution for all women, something which they found painfully reminiscent of Soviet adherence to the party line. Instead, many of those women who felt that it was important to challenge restrictive notions of female abilities, roles and spheres of activity believed that it was best to teach by their own example what women were capable of. They might model different life-styles, attitudes to work or the sharing of domestic roles in the hope that other women would follow suit, but they maintained that it was crucial for each woman to be allowed to choose what suited her best and not to feel criticised or condemned for her choice. The leader of the Tarusa Association of Women stated her opinion in this respect quite succinctly:

In my opinion, a woman should not be restricted within four walls. But some people think that they would like it and so I do not set out to prove anything to a woman who embroiders her pillow cases and prepares perfect dinners and considers that this is the purpose of her life. I would like to show her

that there are other ways of living too, but I am not out to force anyone to come over to this other way of life.

Thus challenging women's oppression was something which was frequently seen as an underlying or secondary aspect of women's organisations' activities. Even those organisations or individuals who believed strongly in the need for such activities were usually convinced of the need for a subtle and individualised approach. As a consequence work of this kind was more likely to take the form of encouraging personal empowerment and consciousness-raising than radical public activism or confrontational campaigns and demonstrations.

Combating specific forms of discrimination

Bringing discussions of women's rights into the public sphere was often seen as excessively controversial and beyond the remit of the grassroots women's organisations involved in this study. It was also something which an organisation's membership could not necessarily be expected to support unanimously. Combating specific forms of discrimination and particularly negative attitudes towards the particular constituency of women around which an organisation had been formed was seen in a slightly different light. Organisations were more likely to see the relevance in organising to combat discriminatory attitudes or practices where they could be seen to be having an immediate and tangible impact on members lives and those of women like them. Similarly in such cases, individual members were less inclined to shy away from confrontation or to see it as tangential to the more pressing concerns of their day to day lives.

Interviews with the members of 'Aviatrisa', the organisation for women in aviation, revealed a wide range of attitudes towards gender and appropriate roles for women. Despite their unorthodox professional careers these women could not necessarily have been expected to unite behind a banner of equality or campaign for women's liberation. However, as a group these women were unequivocal in their view that women in aviation were faced with specific forms of discrimination which needed to be questioned and combated. They resented the fact that women who had achieved great feats as pilots and

test pilots, some of them engaging in military action during the Second World War, were ignored and neglected by the Russian state and society. Many were outraged at the way in which women were being forced out of the profession and excluded from entering it and although they frequently described *Aviatrix* as having been set up initially as a social organisation, they were adamant that its remit now extended to defending the rights and dignity of women pilots. The organisation was engaged in many forms of activity aimed at providing support for members. The group attempted to provide practical support to pensioners, veterans and pilots who had lost their jobs. Social events were organised as regularly as possible and were often described as an important source of emotional support and a chance for women to meet and exchange experiences with others from the same professional background. Alongside these activities, members were involved in lobbying against the barring of women from the profession and from training schools, campaigning to raise the benefits awarded to war veterans and pensioners, and countering disrespectful attitudes in the media. These different spheres of activity were not seen as disparate or disjointed however, since for many the primary goal in each case was to help women, in this case women pilots, preserve their dignity and pride.

One member who spoke at length of the importance of challenging discrimination against women in the field of aviation and particularly of combating negative representations of women pilots in the media was equally convinced of the importance of creating an environment in which these women could rediscover a sense of achievement and worth in themselves and their profession. When asked what she felt was the most important part of the organisation's work she gave an example from a recent forum which they had organised bringing together women in aviation from across the former Soviet Union:

Take the example of our older women. At the forum when they asked all the Sea Pilots to stand and they all jumped up like that. Don't you think that made them feel good for a while to come? Everyone's forgotten them, forgotten they were pilots and the quality and valour of what they did.

Despite her conviction that the organisation should attempt to fight discriminatory attitudes and practices, this woman was less convinced than many of their chances of success. It was important she maintained not to accept such things without any resistance, not least because

putting up a fight would of itself bring women together and help to instil in them a sense of solidarity and self-respect. Nonetheless, it was at the more individual and personalised level of making women feel good about themselves that she thought the organisation had the most significant role to play.

In a similar vein, some of the members of Just Mum, believed that their organisation could play a role as an important counterweight to negative social attitudes towards single mothers, as well as campaigning for increased welfare benefits and better access to public services. During interviews many of these women complained that the difficulties they confronted financially and emotionally as a result of trying to raise a child alone were compounded by unsympathetic responses from the authorities and the general public. They felt that an important aspect of the organisation was that it brought together women who shared these experiences and could present a more positive model of what it might mean to be a single mother, to each other, as well as, perhaps, to the broader society. A leading member of the organisation explained this in the following terms:

We are all single mothers, and more than that, we are almost all women who became pregnant and had our children out of wedlock, not divorcees or widows. This is significant because public opinion towards us is very bad. We are seen as having brought it on ourselves, but we didn't get pregnant all alone you know and for most of us to have ended up in this position also means that we have been through some sort of psychological trauma and personal crisis. So the moral support and shared experience we get is also very important. Women get to see that they are not alone, that there are others like them and that is very important in restoring their self confidence.

Once again, rather than giving up in the face of adversity, women in each of these organisations refused to accept the circumstances they felt were forced upon them by the reform process, by state indifference or hostility or by socially acceptable, negative attitudes towards single-mothers or women pilots. This resistance was manifested more often by the creation of a space for alternative perspectives and a supportive environment within the organisations themselves than by attempts to confront or alter public opinion or to engage in political activism and public debate. In several of the organisations studied a number of members felt that a more proactive and public approach might be called for, however, this was recognised as a controversial stance and often softened or abandoned in

order to prevent conflict within an organisation or repel members who might not share such a radical perspective.

In conclusion: the achievements and impact of Russian grassroots women's organisations

When considering the achievements and impact of grassroots women's organisations in post-Soviet Russia, it is crucial that they be measured in terms of their own criteria, goals and perspectives. This may mean that those who study these organisations from without, in other words observers, academics and funding agencies from a different social background and cultural experience, will need to set aside preconceived ideas of what constitutes valid 'civil society activity' and look afresh at the motivations for and consequences of the work of such organisations. With the scales of our own sometimes arrogant assumptions lifted from our eyes we may discover a whole plethora of subtle factors at play, intricately woven into multiple layers of activity, some of which may even come closer to achieving goals of 'democratic participation', 'civic responsibility' and 'challenging gendered oppression' than we might otherwise have imagined.

For the majority of the organisations involved in this study, the initial impetus which had brought women together, and which continued to bring new women to them, was a search for collective survival strategies and the hope that these would be more effective and sustainable than those which women were able to engage in as individuals. Far from fragmenting into a society of isolated and self-centred individuals, women have sought one another out in order to gain, but also to offer, mutual support and solace and collective strength and bargaining power. From this perspective it is logical that women have been drawn to groups of other women sharing a particular background and set of circumstances, be they related to professional career, life-style, experience or geographical locality. These sources of closer identification have allowed groups to pool those resources and address those issues with the most immediate relevance for their particular constituency of women.

Once united in an organisation, these groups of women have quickly found numerous advantages in their collective identity. Pragmatic goals and practical activities were often

given the highest priority and seen as the most valuable achievements in the first instance. Organisations have been able to be effective in this respect in a number of different ways. Some have engaged directly in lobbying local authorities and institutions of power for resources and against infringements of the rights of individual women or a particular group of women. Others have been able to procure and redistribute material support, goods and services. Even when external support has been almost entirely lacking, groups have managed to pool their own, often meagre, reserves in order to offer short-term support to women undergoing a particularly severe period of crisis. However, despite their principled prioritisation of such practically oriented activities, many members described a less immediately tangible but ultimately equally valuable impact as the most significant consequence of their engagement with a grassroots women's organisation.

Organisations have often found it impossible to sustain many of their practically oriented activities on a long-term basis. This has largely been a consequence of lack of resources, financial and infrastructural support. It has certainly not been due to lack of commitment, ingenuity or perseverance on the part of the women involved. Yet despite this disappointment, striking right at the heart of what had been often stated as an organisation's primary purpose, members were adamant in the defence of their organisation and of the positive impact it had on their lives. In this context women spoke primarily of the importance of the moral support offered by an organisation. This support took a number of forms. For some it provided a much-needed contradiction to negative attitudes towards and stereotypes of women 'like them'. For others it offered a mainstay to sustain them through a period of crisis simply because they knew they were not entirely isolated with their problems and could share their worries and feelings of despair with a group of sympathetic listeners. Finally, many women explained that their active membership in a grassroots women's organisation helped them to escape a sense of isolation, powerlessness, grinding anxiety and pessimism for the future.

In addition, the activities of these organisations and their consequences for the individual women who were their members and leaders point implicitly towards broader social and

political consequences, even without these being an explicit part of their agenda. The majority of these organisations were not set up with the stated aim of challenging gendered oppression, nor of producing ‘socially responsible citizens’, nor of overcoming social apathy and disengagement. Yet in many instances they had made incursions into each of these areas. The practical activities of these organisations had offered a focus and in some ways an outlet for the already existing social consciences of their members. Women had gained self-confidence and pride from their engagement in activities from which they can quickly see clear benefits for other women and sometimes for themselves or their families. These organisations had brought together women who were able to model for each other a variety of responses to the essentialist attitudes to women, their appropriate roles and spheres of activity which had become part of the dominant discourse of gender in the public domain. They had empowered women individually and collectively by offering them a sense of their own ability to influence the impact of social change on their lives and the lives of their families and loved ones. In this way they had given their members a renewed pride in themselves and their ability to contribute to a positive and mutually supportive project and a degree of hope and optimism for the future which in the light of Russia’s protracted and profound social, economic and political difficulties may be the most valuable gift of all

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