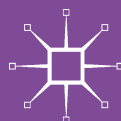


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THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF WOMEN AND GENDER IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION

Edited by Melanie Ilic



The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender
in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union

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Editor

The Palgrave
Handbook of Women
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Opportunities for Self-Realisation?: Young Women's Experiences of Higher Education in Russia

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This chapter is based on case study research into the changing nature of the higher education experiences among graduates in Krasnodar, southern Russia, between July and August 2013. Alongside interviews with educational experts, this research includes in-depth interviews with 15 female university students and five recent graduates. The study has feminist predispositions in so far as it was conducted by a female researcher in a patriarchal society. Thus, as well as exploring the higher education experience of female students, a central objective of this study has been to discuss the female research participants as competent subjects creating opportunities in a male-dominated society such as Russia's. Hence, this analysis applies a feminist approach that foregrounds hitherto unheard voices.¹

The research participants were drawn from the three major higher education institutions in Krasnodar: the Kuban State University (KubSU), the Kuban State Technological University (KubSTU) and the Kuban State Agrarian University (KubSAU). While the Kuban State Agrarian University is, with 174 ha, the largest university in the south of Russia and one of the whole country's leading universities for higher education in agriculture, the Kuban State University is by far the most prominent higher education institution in the Krasnodar region. Currently it has more than 27,000 students enrolled and approximately 6000 students graduate each year. Furthermore, the Kuban State University is the only university in the Krasnodar region that is recognised as among the 40 best universities in Russia.²

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To examine the higher education experiences of these young women, this chapter is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the gendered experience of university and examines the reasons why these young women chose to go to university and why most of them chose to follow a typical female career path. The second part explores the ways in which these young women traversed inequalities at university, such as corruption, which does not seem to be a gendered experience. Before discussing these complex experiences, this chapter elaborates on the broader theoretical framework, the background to higher education and gender equality, and the changing gender discourse in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The empirical analysis in this chapter is set within wider debates regarding reflexive modernisation and individualisation. For social theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, the reflexive individual is central to today's global culture, in which borders and boundaries are gradually being dissolved.³ The penetration of markets and abstract systems into every aspect of post-Soviet Russian society has rendered life a 'planning project', in which social actors must constantly monitor their skills and competencies in an attempt to 'colonise the future'. Old certainties and traditions come to be questioned and collective identities rooted in class and gender no longer guide the life course, but become differential resources in the construction of individual, 'do-it-yourself' biographies.⁴ Thus, while social divisions continue to structure opportunities, this process is experienced increasingly at the individual rather than the group level: individuals themselves become 'the reproduction unit for the social in the life world'.⁵ Accordingly, youth as a stage of life has been individualised in ways that impel young people to become reflexive and shape their own biographies.⁶ This, however, does not mean that young people are considered completely 'free' agents. Rather, they may be viewed as making creative responses within the boundaries of the parent culture.

In several respects, the notions of 'individualisation' and 'de-standardisation' appear particularly applicable to the transitions made by young people in former socialist countries. Whereas transitions from simple to 'post-Fordist' modernities have taken place in the West over many years, the disintegration of the socialist variant of modernity and, moreover, the fundamentally state-led nature of this variant have apparently made both the pace and depth of these processes extreme. At every stage of the transition to adulthood, everything that had previously been structured by state agencies and organisations has now become a matter of individual choice and responsibility. As Pilkington argues, with regard to Russia, 'the collapse of state embedded social organisations structuring and managing young people's careers, leisure time, moral welfare and upbringing ... transformed the experience of living in Russia overnight from one of being tied to a chronically stable state to being "unleashed" into a critically unstable society'.⁷ At the same time, however, the dislocating and

often stunted nature of the transformations taking place in post-Soviet Russia may equally have resulted in a 're-embedding' of individuals not into new and predominantly market-based social institutions, but rather into 'insulated' and 'pre-modern' forms of integration. Reflecting this, research on youth transitions in a number of post-communist countries has pointed to processes of re-traditionalisation and greater dependence by young people on family and kinship rather than individual level resources.⁸

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE SOVIET UNION AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

The centralised system of the Soviet approach to higher education was rooted in the socialist core belief of equality, which was based on the principle of equal distribution of resources among the various ethnic, linguistic, cultural and gender groups. Thus, the state approach was gender neutral and most policies were also gender neutral, focusing on education equality in terms of access (that is, giving the same opportunity to participate at university), attainment (that is, giving the same number of years of education) and achievement (that is, demonstrating learning of the same quality and type of knowledge).⁹ Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, women were gradually qualifying for more education and had caught up with men.¹⁰ Nonetheless, women were concentrated in the educational fields characterised by leading to lower wage returns—mostly education, the social sciences, the humanities, medicine, law and economics—whereas men were concentrated in more remunerative fields, such as skilled manual work and engineering.¹¹

In the Soviet Union, university degrees were highly regarded, and there was fierce competition for the limited places in the 600 universities and institutes serving a population of approximately 300 million people.¹² The enrolment rates in higher education and the available number of study places were all centrally controlled by the Soviet state. Job assignments from almost all educational institutions were obligatory, ensuring a close link between the educational system and the labour market.¹³ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Russia was hit by a 'transitional shock' characterised by increasing employment insecurity and a considerable restructuring of both the economy and the labour market. In this transition process, from 1991 to 2002, the spending on higher education institutions fell from 1.2 to 0.4% of GDP and swung back to 3.5% in 2007.¹⁴ The latter is still much less than Western countries spend.

Noteworthy here is that while universities struggled for finance after the demise of the Soviet educational system, the number of students increased immensely, from approximately three million to six million, accounting for more than half the population aged between 17 and 22.¹⁵ This increase in student numbers was also accompanied by a feminisation of higher education. A difference of more than 15% in gross enrolment ratios between female (72.99%) and male students (57.38%) was recorded in Russia between 1999 and 2000.¹⁶ Just as in Soviet times, women were surpassing men in terms of

educational attainment. Nonetheless, empirical studies have found that women were heavily penalised in terms of growing gender wage inequality.¹⁷ Occupational allocation was very gender-specific, with women concentrated in low-paying jobs.¹⁸ Evidently, Russian women were less able than men to convert their educational advantages into occupational opportunities.

While during Soviet times higher education was exclusively funded by the state and access to it was free, the reforms following 1991 created private and public programmes that led to a massification of higher education. The numbers of non-state universities grew most rapidly in the 1990s (from 0 in 1992 to 358 in 2000 and 450 by 2010).¹⁹ The numbers of fee paying students increased rapidly in the first decade after 2000 (from 146,000 in 1993 and 1,940,000 in 2000 to 4,654,000 in 2009).²⁰ By 2012, the student population of approximately 143 million had access to nearly 3000 institutes of higher education.²¹ With more than 6000 enrolled students per 100,000 population, the reach of Russia's higher education system is second only to that of the United States.²²

While the state in the 1990s paid little attention to higher education policy, being overwhelmed with more urgent and economic issues, from 2000 onwards, the year after Putin came to power, higher education began to be promoted as a source of innovation, economic growth and regional development. A major driving force behind this significant change has been the state-led modernisation (*modernizatsiya*) of Russia's economy and societal institutions.²³ This modernising approach to higher education focused on major changes. It focused, for one thing, on introducing competition into the service delivery by instituting the Unified State Examination (USE; *YeGE – Yedinyi Gosudarstvennyi Eksamen*) in 2009.²⁴ Even though the higher education market grew rapidly in the 1990s, state funds were still being distributed between the universities according to Soviet type planning procedures. Therefore, the reforming government sought to tie state funding to the student and make universities compete for state funds by attracting more and better qualified students.²⁵ At the same time, the Ministry of Education introduced in 2000 a new quality management system aimed at increasing the effectiveness of state funding in universities.²⁶

Alongside the national project of modernising higher education, the Russian government also acknowledged the need to internationalise Russia's higher education system, so as to keep up with wider globalisation processes. Thus, in September 2003, Russia joined the Bologna process which set out to harmonise European education standards through adopting an Anglo-American model of higher education.²⁷ This attempt certainly shook up the Russian higher education system, one of its biggest changes being the 2007 move away from the semi-reformed Soviet university model of the 1990s to the two-tier Bologna model. This process also involved a change, from the previous wholly *specialist* qualification which took 5 years to complete, to universities operating within a four- plus two-year system, meaning that students take 4 years to complete a Bachelor's degree and a further two to qualify for a Master's degree.

To conclude this background to higher education in post-Soviet Russia, it seems that although Russian women have caught up with Russian men in the numbers of enrolments in and graduation from universities, Gerber and Schaefer argue that this gender equality in higher education has not translated into gender equality in the earnings of university students.²⁸ However, this trend is not very different from the experiences of female graduates in Great Britain or in Europe. According to a report by the University of Warwick's Institute for Employment, which analysed the 2012 salaries of more than 17,000 recent graduates in full-time work, one in five men (20%) after completing a first degree is paid more than £30,000, compared with just one in twelve (8%) women who earn the same.²⁹ Women in Europe also earn 16.2% less than men for doing the same job.³⁰

FROM THE SOVIET GENDER DISCOURSE TO GENDER IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

Just before the collapse of the regime, the Soviet Union had the highest rate of female worker participation of any industrial society.³¹ According to Lapidus, more than 85% of working age women were engaged in full-time work or study, and women constituted 51% of all workers and employees.³² The Soviet government had officially proclaimed the establishment of gender equality. Free, universal primary education was introduced in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, eight years of universal education in the 1950s and universal secondary education in the 1970s. By the 1980s, 61% of women in the Soviet Union were specialists with higher or secondary specialised education and women comprised 54% of students in higher educational establishments.³³

However, the idea of establishing gender equality in the Soviet era has to be treated carefully, as many publications have shown.³⁴ Although in official discourse the Soviet government's commitment to gender equality was demonstrated by such policies as equal pay for equal work and child care, this Soviet ideology was also tailored to the needs of different periods of Soviet history, as defined by their political leadership.³⁵ Instead of achieving gender equality, the formal state structures of socialist society and also the separation of the public and private spheres seem in practice to have strengthened traditional gender norms and reinforced traditional patriarchy.³⁶

The demise of the Soviet Union prompted a re-evaluation of Soviet gender politics in which Russia seemed to have experienced a certain 're-traditionalisation', that is, a resurgence of traditional notions of gender as a way of dealing with the allegedly 'distorted' Soviet past.³⁷ With the demise of old structures, new structures and opportunities in the labour force led women to new opportunities for *samorealizatsiya* (self-realisation).³⁸ Yet, according to Ashwin and Lytkina, the dual-earner family in which the man is the chief breadwinner and the woman takes primary responsibility for household management remains the norm in Russia.³⁹ In this respect, Tsetsura maintains that the reason women were subordinated to men in the Soviet Union and in Russia was the cultivation of a dual role for women as mothers and workers which

placed emphasis on women's roles as family and house keepers, whereas men's role was to be the breadwinner.⁴⁰ In short, these contradictions between traditional gender roles and emancipation still continue to dictate women's lives in post-Soviet Russia.

UNIVERSITY—AN UNQUESTIONABLE CHOICE

Much research on youth transitions has shown that entering university after school is not an uncommon decision for girls. In fact, in the Australian and British contexts, for example, for young women with a white, middle-class background, it has been described as a natural and unquestionable career progression bolstered by strong family expectations.⁴¹ In this respect, Allatt writes that these 'taken for granted assumptions' were embedded in middle-class family processes, where the expectation of going to university does not need to be articulated.⁴² Similarly, research participants also mentioned that at home there was not much discussion about going to university; it was simply embedded in the family, as stated by Violetta:⁴³

My parents didn't even say a word; it didn't need any discussion because I knew that there was no other option than going to university. We didn't even talk about it. But then again, it never crossed my mind not to go.

Judging by the sharp rise in student numbers in Russia it seems that going to university is a 'taken for granted assumption' across all social backgrounds. Violetta herself could be described as coming from a well-to-do background since both her parents have respectable jobs. Her mother, for example, works in a bank. Considering class background, it is worth mentioning that scholars, such as the Russian sociologist Simon Kordonsky, argue that class in Russia should be understood in terms of rank (*soslovie*), characterised by the power to pass down privileges from generation to generation.⁴⁴ In this way, Russia can be understood as a resource-based society in which resources are constantly redistributed solely among ranks.⁴⁵ Yet, despite the dependence of one's choice of university on resources, as will be shown below, many research participants thought that '*going to university is just something you do for yourself*'. In this way, they indicate transition paths that conform to the individualisation discourse and what du Bois-Reymond calls 'do-it-yourself biographies'.⁴⁶ Thus, this choice is not something that can be related solely to one's social background. Masha, coming from a not too well-off single-parent household, admits.⁴⁷

To be honest, I only went to university just for the sake of experiencing academic life; not to get a better job or that it would help me to progress in life or because my parents had an academic background. I just like learning something new.

Masha not only communicates the ordinariness of going to university, simply because she likes to learn, but at the same time addresses the somewhat

paradoxical development in Russia, where, although most people value higher education, a university degree does not seem to help to get a better job (as discussed below). Despite high student numbers, Russian higher education has suffered in terms of values and standards. Even though Putin has attempted to modernise higher education, his policies have been slow to bear fruit.⁴⁸

Like Masha, Irina maintains that a 'university degree is like fashion'. She thinks that once people know that 'you got a degree, they go "wow, you got a university degree"'. Irina shows that her pursuit of higher education is significant symbolic capital for her to construct a respectable self-identity with.⁴⁹ Both Maria and Irina seem to be performing according to the discourse that demands self-realisation, in which 'each individual must render his or her life meaningful as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in the furtherance of a biographical project of self-realisation'.⁵⁰ Although obtaining a university degree is described as 'choice' and 'fashion', it actually emerges as 'compulsory' in so far as it is the only acknowledged way these women can create a respected subject position for themselves in today's Russian society. This development is also indicated in other research on young women in Russia. Walker, for example, shows how 'working-class' female respondents in vocational education also communicated the importance of having a university degree to create a respected position for themselves.⁵¹

CHOOSING A FEMALE PROFESSION

In the Western context, research has shown that parents are having an increasing impact on the way in which applicants choose university courses and institution.⁵² While a great many of these publications focus on the financial background since the introduction of student fees and its impact on decisions, with parents having a significant influence, often seeing it as a form of investment, there is also a significant number of publications that have highlighted the gendered experience of parental influence.⁵³ Most interesting, for this chapter, is examining the ways that university courses were chosen, which indicate that it is a gendered experience. Growing up in Russia, where patriarchal values are still very much accepted without much questioning, this selection process often embodied limits for the research participants, as Alina confirms:

I always wanted to become a journalist. I love writing and even in school I wrote little articles. But my father said that journalism is too dangerous for a girl and not the right career for a girl because it could involve travel, so instead I decided to study literature.

From this, we can see that the interview response says rather more about the relationship between parents and children in making choices, and is thereby related to gender, given that fathers are often more protective of their daughters than they are of their sons. In this context, it is also noteworthy and significant that Alina herself is second generation Russian-born Armenian. Previous

research on ethnic minorities in Russia has shown that ethnic minorities, Armenian girls in Russia in particular, encounter patriarchal upbringing and are not completely free agents.⁵⁴

Another research participant also discussed how her parents decided where she should study. Anna is from a village about an hour's journey from Krasnodar. Rostov, which has a better university, is another big city located about two hours from her village and could have been an alternative to Krasnodar, but she says that her parents' overall financial situation did not allow her to go further than Krasnodar; at the same time, she claims, her parents were protective of her, since she was a teenage girl when she had to choose her university:

My parent didn't want me to study far away from them. Our financial situation didn't allow it either. At that time, it seemed cheaper to study in Krasnodar than further away. But then again, a 17-year-old girl far away from her parents ... Well, my parents thought that they really didn't want me to go far away. That's why I didn't go. Even though maybe now I kind of regret that I didn't study in Rostov or Moscow, even.

Interestingly, some research participants considered the aspect of familiarity with specific subjects and chose to study the subject that their parents had studied. However, this principle of choice was not only communicated in interviews with female graduates, but also male graduates and, thus, does not necessarily seem to be a gendered experience.

I chose my course because my parents were indirectly linked to this profession too, well, they kind of suggested to me the Humanities Faculty. (Anita)

Well, it's just we kind of have a dynasty of economists ... Dad, Mum, brother, sister-in-law, granddad and grandma, all of them ... and that's why I studied economics. (Olga)

While Olga does not seem to conform to the gendered experience of choosing a degree subject that is seen rather as more male-dominated, the subsequent excerpt from an interview with Masha confirms a trend in higher education that women generally chose very 'female' degrees.⁵⁵

This is because I understood that I couldn't study well in the Faculty of Science, I don't like maths, chemistry or physics ... I had the choice between history or philology, but chose philology because my sister studied there, and really I knew the faculty very well, that's why ... My Mum also studied at this university, and my sister and I knew some of the lecturers already and some of the students too. I just liked it there...

Yet there is also Katya, who chose to study engineering, and seems to have deliberately made the gendered discourse work to her advantage:

I always wanted to study a course that has fewer girls but more boys because boys always help me, and give me anything I want but girls, they are too dramatic, they gossip and all that rubbish.

CONSTRAINED BY INEQUALITIES AT UNIVERSITY

According to the 2013 Global Wealth Report, in Russia the gap between the broad masses and the super-rich is greater than in any other major country in the world. Thirty-five per cent of the country's total wealth is in the hands of 0.00008% of the population, or 110 people out of a total population of 143 million.⁵⁶ Similarly, higher education is not spared from inequality in terms of opportunities, access and career progression. Therefore, this section explores corruption and informal practices as examples of opportunities and constraints. Most importantly, as previous research has shown, these practices, intended to navigate inequalities, do not explicitly relate to gender but cut across all sections of the Russian population.⁵⁷

Corruption in higher education may be defined as a system of informal relationships established to regulate unsanctioned access to material and non-material assets through abusing the office of public or corporate trust.⁵⁸ Corruption in higher education ranges from bribery in order to be admitted to university and receive good marks in examinations, and fraudulent schemes for receiving and using budget money, to bribes for the distribution of money advocated for construction and repair work.⁵⁹ The Russian Public Opinion Research Centre conducted a study of corruption perceptions among Russians at the end of 2008. This survey showed that 15% of respondents thought that education was considered amongst the most corrupt professions.⁶⁰ Thirty-six per cent of the respondents admitted in this survey that they had made informal payments to educators.⁶¹

According to some research participants, corruption is so great a problem that the end result of a degree seems not to matter anymore:

A university degree is not really a guarantee that you are a clever and well-educated person, qualified for work. These days you can buy your degree, you can pay to study, you can pay for exams, you can get an average degree, or you can get a first class degree, but this is not necessarily because you studied hard but because you have a good relationship with your lecturer, meaning you paid your lecturer.
(Anna)

As research has shown, the increasing gap between pay rates in the private and public sectors of the economy urges public employees to seek other sources of income.⁶² In post-Soviet times, the average salaries for academics have been lower than the average per capita income in Russia, with professors earning less than a professional holding a Master's degree. Besides encouraging academics to find additional sources of income, this has also led to a significant brain drain

—estimates indicate that approximately 80,000 academics left Russia in the early 1990s alone—while not enough young Russians are entering academia to replace an ageing academic cohort.⁶³

With few exceptions, Russian universities do not address issues relating to academic offenses (such as plagiarism, the falsification of term papers or even various forms of gratification in return for good grades) at institutional level.⁶⁴ These corrupt practices are used by both students and lecturers. According to a MEMO Survey, 14% of the respondents reported that they had cheated during exams and 4% had bought at least one mid-term-, term-paper or thesis.⁶⁵ Just as the survey showed, most of the research participants talked casually about these practices and justified using them to get by in their degree course:

I paid a bribe for my practical training at university. We needed to conduct a period of summer practical training. I know that it's very hot in Krasnodar in the summer; I didn't have anywhere to live and was supposed to work for three weeks in the park interviewing people. I knew I wouldn't like it. And in all fairness, I thought I wouldn't learn anything new from it. So I found out how much it would cost, put the money into an envelope, and met the lecturer at the other end of town, in a different part of Krasnodar. We did it all really professionally (*gramotno*). I went with him to his car, we didn't exchange a word about the money, about the bribe, he just opened the door of his car, I put the envelope on the seat inside the car and left. Well, you see all was very professionally done without any risks. Like, because he didn't say a word, I couldn't record him on my phone. There's no evidence. And well, I know that many do pass exams in this way. (Tatiana)

Like Tatiana, who justified her bribe by referring to the hot weather in Krasnodar and her surmise that she would not learn anything, many students provided similar justifications of the ordinariness of these corrupt practices. However, some of the research participants resorted to these practices very much out of desperation, as one young student, a single mother explained to me: by paying for her exams, she could get a degree without going to university, and at the same time could take care of her child. In short, she is making such opportunities work in her favour to enable her to pass her degree, which in the long run could contribute to her following the path of 'self-realisation'.

Noteworthy here is that these corrupt practices very often originate in the belief, as students claim, that higher education in Russia has nowadays lost its high quality. Maria, for example, said that 'in Soviet times, having a higher education degree meant you are *intelligentsiya*, but these days having a degree really means nothing'. Tatiana also made it clear in our interview that her future salary does not depend on her education but actually on how well she works. Hence a degree for her is more a formality and not necessarily 'a sign of intelligence'. Others, such as Violetta, highlight the influence of corruption on the devaluing of degrees in Russia, but at the same time stress the meaning of a degree as symbolic capital:

A diploma is just a tick in the box – many employers know that you can buy a diploma. In fact, it's not important if you have a diploma as employers don't really look at it. You don't really need a diploma for career reasons. But I guess many parents would like to say 'this is my child with higher education'. The general saying is 'what would my child be without higher education?'

Another research participant makes it even more explicit: 'our higher degrees aren't of high quality and therefore don't mean much. You can buy degrees'. She continues, however, to justify these informal and corrupt practices as a sign of real democracy and concludes by raising the question: 'Whether you pay or don't pay for your exam, isn't this what democracy is about—free choice?'

The above interview excerpts all come from research participants whose families are fairly well-to-do. However, it seems that the research participants who rely on state-funded places and have no money to pay bribes are far more critical of these informal practices when they talk about their disadvantages. The next excerpt is from Irina's interview. Irina studies economics and has obtained a state-funded place. She calls herself disadvantaged because, according to her, only a few lecturers treat her fairly; some lecturers even give her worse marks than she deserves because she cannot pay a bribe. Nonetheless, she concludes by defending corrupt practices.

Well, the Economics and Law Faculty is one of the most corrupt faculties in the university. I just know that my peers, some of them, said to the lecturer, 'well, I don't want to study ... well, that costs, for example, 10,000 roubles'. Well, we have so many studying economics, they're all from rich families, they just need to tick the box and have a degree. For them it's much easier to pay lecturers than actually study. But then again, why go to lectures and write exams if you can already earn some money?

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the complex experiences of young women in higher education in post-Soviet Russia. In many respects, the empirical data presented here confirm the reflexive modernisation thesis, which points to processes of individualisation and the weakening of norms that previously guided the lives of individuals, just as in other Western societies. With regard to the ways that these young women decide whether to study at university and choose their course, for instance, this analysis shows similarities to their equivalent for female graduates in Western democracies. Just like Baker's and Reay et al.'s research participants, the young women's narratives in the research presented here demonstrate aspects of notions of self-realisation and choice, as well as personal responsibility.⁶⁶ They navigate their gendered identities by, for example, consciously choosing university degrees as expected in light of the gendered discourse in Russian society.

Even though they demonstrated agency and choice, these were not always supported by resources and opportunities, especially when it comes to the emerging higher education system in which corruption is entrenched. While this provides opportunities for some to succeed, for others with limited resources it is a clear disadvantage. To conclude, the ways the young women in this research ‘choose’ to negotiate their identities point to McRobbie’s contention that ‘choice is a modality of constraint’.⁶⁷ It is not that these women free themselves from constraints, but that they deal with them in a complex, ‘individualised’ way. Although most of the research participants appear to move freely within these constraints, they do not challenge them.

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