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Women's Responses to the Conservative Turn in Russia and Russian Social Policy

By Ann-Mari Sätre¹

Abstract

Russia has experienced a conservative turn in gender policy since the early 2000s, especially since 2012. There have been conservative trends in legislation and policies along with a deterioration of women's rights in Russia. The conservative trend is also reflected more specifically in developments in social policy. The aim of this article is to highlight how women have experienced and responded to these policy changes. Both resistance and acceptance have been noted: during my field work I have observed four kinds of responses. The article further discusses how the conservative trend might contribute to a social marginalization of women.

The theoretical framework of the article is institutional economics with an orientation to agency as the changing factor. The most relevant part of the data for this paper is composed of over 250 interviews about policies on poverty and social marginalization collected in 2010-2019 from five Russian regions with social work experts and other persons working in local formal or informal organizations, most of them women. Four of the regions are located in north-western Russia and one in the Volga region.

Keywords: Russia, Women's responses, Social policy

Introduction

Russia has experienced a conservative turn in gender policy since the early 2000s. There have been conservative trends in legislation and policies along with signs of a deterioration of women's rights in Russia. The conservative trend is also reflected more specifically in developments in social policy. The aim of this article is to highlight how women have responded to the conservative turn with respect to the changes in social policy.

The most relevant part of data for this paper is composed of over 250 interviews on policies on poverty and social marginalization collected in 2010-2019 from the Nizhny Novgorod region, the Novgorod region, St. Petersburg, the Arkhangelsk region, and the Karelian Republic with social work experts and other persons working in local formal or informal organizations, most of them women.

In historical continuity from the Soviet Union, social policy is predominantly a female responsibility in Russia. This paper gives an account of social policy, including women's informal efforts to help impoverished people in difficult situations.

There is a divided view on women's role ever since the Soviet past which is also reflected in social policy in contemporary Russia. There are differences in opinion among women who are active in the social sphere on whether they should support going back to traditional values or work

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for another agenda. This is reflected in the different responses to the conservative turn. There have been observations of agency combining both resistance to and acceptance of the conservative turn in gender policy. They indicate that rather than confrontation or complete subordination, it is sometimes possible to find a balance between the two. I will argue that the divided views on social policy are reflected in social work.

This paper will highlight how women work across networks to solve social problems. This paper will also draw attention to how the conservative turn in gender policy might contribute to a social marginalization of women in two ways. First, a deterioration of women's rights in Russia might reinforce a downward spiral for those who have crossed the threshold to poverty. Secondly, the focus of social policy on promoting family values and increasing birth rates might imply that the available resources are not sufficient to combat poverty and social marginalization of women.

The theoretical framework of this paper is institutional economics with an orientation to agency as the changing factor. The analytical framework is based on Douglass North's categorisation of four main kinds of institutions which influence the way a society develops: legal rules, organisational forms, enforcement, and behavioural norms.² While formal rules can be changed by political decisions, informal rules, such as behavioural norms, are rooted in society, and are not so quickly changed. In this paper, the impact of especially one informal institution is discussed: the survival of the norm that women are responsible for the organisation of social welfare.

Gender and Poverty

Soviet society and politicians pronounced equality across gender in all Soviet republics within the state socialist order. Many scholars and activists questioned such claims after the demise of the Soviet Union. They undertook many activities to popularize and implement the values and principles of gender equality. These principles were expected to come to fruition through the creation of a solid legislative basis, ensuring equal rights and opportunities and state guarantees of gender equality.

However, the 1990s were also a time of increasing poverty rates. In terms of gender and poverty we found two discussions (Sätre 2019: 30-31). On the one hand, we heard about the feminization of poverty. Women had lower wages, and more women than men had an income below the poverty line. Women were the ones who worked in the budget sector, and who had very low pay, they did most of the unpaid work within households, and it was quite evident that single parents for the most part were women. Women were also the first to lose their jobs during workplace closures in the 1990s. It is clear that the gendered segregation on the labour market continued from the Soviet time.

But there is also another discussion that points at women often having the capability to cope with transformation, being responsible for finding solutions to everyday problems within households as well as in their local surroundings. We have also seen that men have difficulties fulfilling the expectations of being the main bread-winner, failing in the attempts to build up businesses, or simply failing to cope with new life circumstances (Ashwin 2010; Asztalos Morell and Tiurikova 2014; Kay 2006; Sätre 2012).

² Institutions include the restrictions that humans have created to regulate interaction in society North, Douglass. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A Gender Backlash

The poverty phenomenon of the 1990s led to resources being allocated to social security but also laid the basis for the professionalisation of social work (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov 2002). Starting in the early 2000s, however, Russian politicians and society have attempted to evade the ideals of gender equality and shift their meanings and practices. In 2003, a law on gender equality did not pass in the Parliament, and after a series of unsuccessful attempts it was altogether rejected in 2018. Thus, Russia has no legal basis (e.g. to prosecute violence against women), and in 2017, a new law decriminalized violence in the family. The State Commission for Improvement of the Situation of Women ceased to exist in 2004, and the role that international organizations played in the process of women's empowerment was seriously undermined by the new legislation on NGOs, denying in practice their funding from abroad. A draft law on banning abortion has also been under discussion in Parliament since 2011. Alongside this, a state ideological campaign was initiated under the banner of 'traditional values', addressing areas such as family, patriotism, and Orthodoxy (Gradszkova 2019). However, there have also been proposals that the law regulating violence within the family will be changed back to criminalize violence within the family again. There are obviously some differences in opinion regarding this law among central decision-makers.³

The conservative turn with respect to gender has been widely documented. Several pieces of evidence have been presented about how leading female politicians' views have been changing away from supporting women's rights (Gradszkova 2017; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014; Johnson & Saarinen 2013; Johnson 2014; Muravyeva 2018). In fact, it is important to emphasize that the anti-gender rhetoric had already started in the 1990s, that is, before Putin came to power. Although gender studies entered Russia as a discipline in the beginning of the 1990s and was accepted as an academic subject to be taught at some Russian universities, it was severely weakened by the end of the 1990s (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014). Political leaders, the church, and parts of the population and civil society organizations are believed to oppose the whole topic, including gender equality.⁴

The rise and fall of the women's party in the early 1990s is well accounted for by Linda Cook and others (Cook 2007). This is reminiscent of the 1930s when there were two strands of women's rights. One view was to promote women's rights as women. The other strand was claiming women's rights as mothers. We can see these different ways to claim women's rights also highly relevant today. The first group denoted 'feminists', representing the view that women are equal to men, and that women should be represented in the political sphere. The second group included those who emphasized women's rights as mothers.⁵

There are quite a few different interpretations of 'the conservative turn', what it means, when it took place, how changes are related to anti-western values, anti-gender views, patriotism, paternalism, and a return to authoritarian rule and traditional values. In this paper, I will not focus on the causes, but rather discuss women's responses to 'the conservative turn'. During my field work I have noticed four kinds of responses. Two of these are perhaps more politically oriented, direct responses to the conservative turn. We will discuss attempts to promote women's rights in

³ Information from a deputy in the state дума, September 2019.

⁴ See for example Højdestrand (2017) on parents' organizations and grassroots mobilization in defense of traditional family values.

⁵ Russia has two women's political parties that are officially registered as political parties: People's Party 'For Women of Russia' and 'Women's Dialogue'. Both these parties promote women's roles as mothers and wives (Hoare & Muavyeva, 2019: 26).

the political sphere first, and then open protests. The two further responses are both connected to women's work across hierarchies to solve social problems. These will be discussed in the later sections.

Attempts to Promote Women's Rights in the Political Sphere

Attempts to promote women and women's rights in the political sphere provide one possible response to the conservative turn in politics and anti-gender politics in particular. A clear trend of an increasing number of women in the Russian parliament has been noted, and the Speaker/Chair of the Federation Council is a woman. In principle, this means that there is a woman in the third highest position in the country. Does it mean that women also reach power and that they in that case use it to improve women's situation in Russian society? According to a deputy in the state дума this is not the case, simply because the speaker officially has to adhere to the policies outlined by the president.⁶ However, informally it could mean something. The fact that women in important positions meet each other could make a difference.

There are a few women in the political leadership at the federal level, some of whom had been members of the 'Women of Russia Party' from the 1990s, before changing to the 'United Russia Party'. It has been indicated, however, that the women in the top political leadership have 'changed opinion', or at least changed their arguments in politics towards promoting 'traditional values' rather than promoting feminist arguments. An easy way to describe this phenomenon is to claim that they have been co-opted (Johnson 2014). It has been noted that some of the conservative reforms, for example those restricting abortion rights, have been initiated by women (Murayeva 2018). It was also a woman who took the initiative regarding the law decriminalizing violence in the family. The dilemma is whether women who are facing a situation where they can stay in power only if they adopt the 'traditional values', should stay and perhaps have a different agenda on the side. This also provides a form of marker against the west. They are not going to adopt western thinking and western ideas. Gender as a concept is rejected, and hence gender equality is rejected as well. Feminist groups have been treated like other forms of opposition. Leaders have not responded to their demands to improve women's rights, but rather frame the activities of feminist groups as a threat to traditional values and culture. This was particularly clear in the case of Pussy Riot (Turbine 2015).

Open Protests to Catch Attention

Feminist reactions or protests against conservative policies have spread through social media, street protests, and female festivals. There are several websites that provide this information. For example, before regional and local elections in September 2020, there was information about female candidates.

The de-criminalization of the Violence Law in 2017 has caught a lot of attention, as did earlier laws on this issue (Johnson 2014; Muravyeva 2018). This caught wider public awareness with the case of the sisters who killed their father in 2019. It appears that the law is again under consideration. Whatever the result will be, it shows that protests matter and can make a difference. Protesting in the streets has become more difficult. Since wide protests in 2011-2012, authorities

⁶ According to her, women in the top leadership positions have been chosen by men on the premise that they should be harmless, hence their role is supposed to be more of a 'decorative nature' (interview, September 2019).

have become more restrictive. Up until then, protests against the discrimination of women in the labor market had been tolerated (interview August 2019).

A few concrete measures have been noted. For example, a café where only women are welcome has been opened in St Petersburg. The name of the café is Simona after the famous French feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir. Feminist festivals have been arranged in Russia. One example is ‘Femfest’ which was arranged in Moscow in 2019.⁷ It is an annual festival which has been arranged in many countries, including Sweden. Information on the different events is presented on the internet, and its lectures on gender violence and gender discrimination are also available online. Furthermore, social media is used by individuals who want to share their own personal stories. For example, some women have published pictures of their own faces with bruises caused by violent men. This kind of use of social media is limited, but it possibly means improved outreach to the public. At least those groups already interested might get some useful advice, information, and general knowledge.

Social Policies Aiming at Increased Birth Rates and Improved Social Welfare

The backlash in gender policy is also reflected in developments in social policy to promote family values in the early 2000s. It appears that social policy has been devoted to promoting increasing birth rates (Cook 2011; Chandler 2013). Policy changes have increased birth grants and family allowances, incorporating clear incentives for second and third children. The Maternity Capital programme is perhaps the most important ingredient.⁸ The National Priority Programmes focusing on housing, health care, education, and agriculture have been targeted towards families. The financial distribution of social benefits has been the main means of regulating poverty. At the same time, it is evident that hierarchical structures in social services have many negative effects. Also, there exist problems of enforcement as, for example, it appears that it is difficult for social services to allocate help to the neediest. The poor must apply for the benefits themselves, but many do not fulfil the requirements.⁹ Formal conditions and procedures regulate the right to social services. Continuously low wages and cuts in social services have meant that expenses tend to be higher than incomes for ordinary people, making people vulnerable to even small changes. If something happens, it might easily start a downward spiral.¹⁰

The Conservative Turn and Socially Oriented NGOs

The conservative turn is reflected in the NGO policy which has been framed to conform with ‘traditional values’, values that have become a tool for social control. NGOs have been subject to increased control from above as manifested in new legislation in 2006 and again in 2012 and in 2014. After the 2012:121-FZ law on “foreign agents” was enforced, NGOs using foreign funding faced an increasing risk of difficulties with authorities. As a result, they became more dependent on domestic funding. A kind of compensation was that the Presidential Administration increased

⁷ In November 2019, the fourth international Festival of Feminist Art “Eve’s Ribs” took place in St. Petersburg. Seven days of performances, readings, short films, and video art works, as well as lectures and discussions took place, all united by one topic: women’s rights.

⁸ The maternity program was to be ended by the end of 2016, but it was extended to 2018. In a speech two weeks before the presidential election in 2018, President Putin announced its extension to 2021.

⁹ Interviews with social work experts 2010-2016.

¹⁰ Especially given the institutional approach, which is used here, focusing on the working of the society as a cause of poverty rather than individual failings (Sätre 2019, chapter 3).

its capacity to distribute presidential grants (Chebankova 2013).¹¹ However, as an NGO leader expressed, in order to be able to get grants, one has to make sure to enter the ‘right’ NGO list—meaning not to enter the list of foreign agents.¹²

Increased control from above suggests that it has become more difficult for bottom-up initiatives to provide social services, given that they are not likely to get support from the state. Some of the larger NGOs with roots from the Soviet period, such as the non-governmental organisations ‘for Deaf and Blind’ and ‘for the Disabled’, provide an example of NGOs which are accepted and supported by the state.¹³

The increased effort to engage people in socially oriented activities is promoted by the Federal law No 40-FZ ‘On socially-oriented NGOs’ (adopted in 2010).¹⁴ It appears that, rather than increasing tax payments to finance social policy, citizens are ‘encouraged’ to contribute to the fulfillment of social aims in various ways. Patriotic messages are also used (Sätre 2019, 151-52). First, there are general measures to redirect NGO activities from politics or human rights issues to social welfare, through new laws regulating the activities of NGOs promising tax relief measures, fewer audits, and less control. NGOs should contribute to ‘social help’, emphasizing the importance of being an active citizen in the social sphere. Secondly, there are raised expectations towards voluntary work, especially that women should engage voluntarily in the social sphere. Third, voluntary contributions to charity by businesses are encouraged on the basis of ethics and moral values, rather than through the use of monetary incentives.

Women Responsible for Social Policy

Pronatalist policies aimed at strengthening and sustaining the nation through increasing the population were mirrored in the pronatalist reform of 2006, which promoted a patriotic ideal of motherhood (Chandler 2013). A stated need to restore an ethic of hard work and service, bringing together individuals with a strong state along with the promotion of the family as a social unit, reflected the view that social problems were more deeply rooted in the values and ideas of people. The reform also meant an increased prioritization of families with children. This was based on the need to increase the birth rate on the one hand, and to solve the problems of so-called social orphans on the other.

It is well-documented that female politicians were usually responsible for social policies in the Soviet Union, and that women continue to take this responsibility at higher as well as at lower political levels in post-Soviet Russia (Cook 2007; Lapidus 1975; Moses 2008). The broad picture supports the finding that Soviet culture taught women to find solutions which continue to be needed in contemporary Russia. As a result of the low priority given to female dominated sectors such as health and social services in state policy, women had to develop an ability to find practical solutions to everyday problems, and these ‘entrepreneurial skills’ have survived after the

¹¹ The number of NGOs was decreasing in the 2000s, but between 2009 and 2016 their number remained nearly the same. See, for example Skokova et.al. 2018, p. 539. To enter the list of ‘social’ NGOs is what a civic organisation can strive for to get state funding and not be harassed by the authorities. What NGO leaders do if they are not on the right list (that of socially oriented NGOs) is to simply re-register. This may decrease control or provide better chances of receiving funding.

¹² Interview with NGO leader, regional capital, May 2016.

¹³ Interviews, regional capital, October 2012; December 2016.

¹⁴ Even if you are classified as a ‘foreign agent’ it might be possible to get funding from the federal level but not from the regional level. ‘Foreign agents’ are supposed to report about activities every month, and send the report to the prosecutor’ (interview with NGO leader, city 2019).

Soviet system (Sätre 2001; 2016). Women use these skills in their formal positions in the social policy hierarchy and in informal positions, when taking responsibility voluntarily in social work. Interviews tell about how social workers, social pedagogues at schools, teachers, doctor's assistants, deputies of commissions or local village councils, local politicians, and others have tried to help people to take part in state programs and become registered to be entitled to support in one way or another. Social workers make their own judgements about whom to support, considering the inadequate resources they have at their disposal. Adhering to North, this is about the survival of informal institutions.

It is possible to distinguish between two kinds of responses. We can see that women create networks across sectors to take care of social problems, which they believe is their responsibility; they promote patriotism and Russian family values. Finally, we will discuss how women set up NGOs and frame activities so as to promote family values and patriotism in order to get 'presidential grants but have other (feminist) agendas.

Women in Charge of Social Issues

It appears that women do have some power at the regional or local level. Also, in some sectors that have been female dominated since the Soviet time, women have powerful positions. Social policy, culture, and health are branches which have generally had female ministers at the top, and then women in most positions at all levels of these hierarchies. Vice governors and vice mayors responsible for social issues are usually women. During my fieldwork I have clearly seen that much is done to prevent or overcome poverty, to help women in difficult life situations and to help women to claim their social and economic rights. But claiming women's rights is not the same as claiming gender equality.

It is widely recognized that women create networks across sectors to take care of social problems, which they believe is their responsibility. I have met women who say they promised the president to help solve social problems:

There are so many questions that fall between sectors, between the social sector and medicine. There are so many standards that questions fall between. The women's organisations have to take care of these! Putin trusts us, counts on us, that we take it on.¹⁵

The same women can oversee the formal networks of the state, when they have access to formal networks as well as to the political hierarchical structures, as well as of the informal networks, through the women's councils.¹⁶ This is illustrated by the links between women's roles in a city.¹⁷ The woman who had been the leader of a women's club for 17 years in a regional capital, Olga, had been vice-governor with responsibility for social policy before she retired two

¹⁵ Interview with leader of women's club, city, November 2017.

¹⁶ Women's councils were launched as separate but party-related bodies in the Soviet Union in 1961 (Saarinen et.al 2013). These top-down organizations created on territorial and industrial principles were, according to Zdravomyslova (2013), designed as "power transmission belts" of Gorbachev's new politics. By 1989, there were 240,000 women's councils in the Russian republic. Several women's councils transformed into feminist groups. Others transformed into independently registered organizations and are active in social welfare (Kulmala 2013). In 2017, there were 56 registered women's councils in Russia; 33 have been closed (although it is possible that they have continued without being registered) (www.min.ru).

¹⁷ Interview with three women from a women's club, city, November 2017.

years earlier. The Political Party *Women of Russia* has an agreement with *United Russia* when it comes to social policies. There are also close connections between *Women of Russia* and women's organizations. In the city in question, the leader of the *Women of Russia* is also the leader of the city's women's council. Olga depicts the close connections and how it works:

We inherited the women's councils, which is a very good movement, from the Soviet time. We have them at the *oblast* level and within each district. They are very active, they take part in all the elections, in all kinds of charity and in societal work. There is a women's council in our city, their leader carries with her women's council practically the whole social sphere on her shoulders.

The women's club is contributing to the activities, as well as all the other women's organizations in the region. The leaders of the women's organizations form a network. It is generally accepted and expected that women take care of social responsibilities. Each organization has some kind of resource to contribute with, but unfortunately, resources have eroded over the years. They do get grants for various activities. It is especially easy to get grants when it comes to families with many children (*mnogodetnie*) and children with disabilities. But often such grants are barely enough to cover new year presents and coffee at celebrations. In any case, these grants never cover their work.

Lidia, who is the head of the Children's cultural center is also the head of 'the Women's Parliament' in this regional capital.¹⁸ She explains how the women's parliament had arranged a roundtable for businesspeople on promoting corporate social responsibility. Most of the participants were women. "It is no longer possible to find a sponsor by putting your hand out, you need to get a grant", she said. This is new and requires a new strategy, they have to mobilize all efforts, to unite all the women's organizations. All the women's organizations live on grants, which means that they have to be able to write applications or collaborate around common resources. They support underprivileged families and women to enter the labor market. Interviews further reveal that women's organisations are not really dealing with questions of gender equality:¹⁹

There is now a women's movement. This is something new, going across all of them, all through the women's organisations. It is an ongoing process, which has to some extent changed the direction of the women's parliament. Questions of equality are left to professionals, there are so many specialists.²⁰

Strategies and experiences go hand in hand through women's paid work, the work they do in excess of their formal obligations and their voluntary work (Sätre 2014a). This work has been facilitated by the possibilities of getting presidential grants. Included here are generally women responsible for social affairs at the local administrations, social workers, and specialists working

¹⁸ In 2018 there was only one 'women's parliament', registered as an NGO in Russia; earlier there were three, but two of them have closed (www.min.ru).

¹⁹ The activities of the 'women's alliance' uniting some 50 women's organizations in a city were mainly focused on cultural exchange between Russian cities (interview with a member, August 2019). Neither did the Eurasian forum that was organized in 2017 and 2018 to unite women's organizations discuss gender equality (interview with one of the participants, September 2019).

²⁰ Interview with the head of the women's parliament, city, November 2017. When asked about the change in the direction of the women's movement in the city since the women's parliament was started 20 years earlier, she said: 'That was another time!'

at the social service centers, and also the traditional women's councils and perhaps churches. Among these groups I have often met the attitude that there are no real problems of gender, as gender equality already exists in Russia, just as it did during the Soviet time. On the contrary, women's problems are caused by their own bad lifestyles.

A charity fund leader explains their new engagement in patriotism since the previous year:

The local leadership wanted to enlarge the network, and patriotism is quite popular at the moment, it is easy to get support for this from entrepreneurs and the local population. It is necessary to strengthen the patriotic spirit among youth and children. To this aim, the charity fund provided support to patriotic clubs to organise activities together with the monastery.²¹

The community invites boys and girls to take part in voluntary work when they are 14 years old. For instance, students are expected to work in summer camps for children without pay, getting room and board and perhaps some small pocket money.

The women's club does not get involved in politics; grants cannot be used on politics, but should go to families with at least three children, disabled children, education programs, development of sports, as well as to patriotic themes. An example of patriotic themes is the project 'Our valley', which praises the army.²² They also support cultural projects, for example a film project where children were heroes, which was about promoting human values in the upbringing of children, why people should help others around them, and having a conscience. Included are also young mothers in such support.

The head of the charity fund in the town is also part of their network. She was proud of having been congratulated by the president when she won a grant as her project was appointed the best in Russia in providing help to families.

Female Networks: Working Across Hierarchies and Sectors

It appears that female officials view women's organisations as potential allies in the social sphere, potential providers of social services, and filling gaps in the badly shredded Russian safety net (See Sätre 2014a). One aspect is also the continued reliance on help from voluntary organizations in one way or another (Kay 2011; Salmenniemi 2008). Local authorities are intertwined with traditional organizations, such as women's councils and veterans' councils, which are officially registered as NGOs (Kulmala 2013; Sätre 2014c). Interviews with professionals at state social services have revealed that they are dependent on NGOs in different ways.

NGOs are faster to understand changes and nuances in our life, which makes it easier to adapt to changes. Also, the fact that NGOs can get presidential grants contributes to making collaboration fruitful.²³

Law 40-FZ 2010 formalized the amendments and defined a spectrum of activities that could be considered as 'socially oriented'. It also clarified those areas in which the state was in the position to grant such organizations financial support (Tarasenko 2018). A deputy from the

²¹ Interview with leader of charity fund, small town, June 2017.

²² Interview with the head of the women's parliament, city, November 2017.

²³ Interview with leader of women's crisis center, city, February 2019.

community had created a charity fund, and she confirmed that it had become easier than before to receive funding from national sources, while funding from international donors had decreased.²⁴ At one of the larger NGOs in a city the interviewees remarked that the new NGO law had meant a lot of problems for them in the beginning, but it was also a matter of understanding how it was actually working.

I still think that according to the foreign agent's law we have to be very careful with foreign money. And always check ourselves not to use it for political purposes. Any political claims. Social policy is still ok.²⁵

An NGO—with a wall in its office full of diplomas—which is devoted to preventing divorces has received presidential grants for various projects.²⁶ The director of this NGO is still the leader 20 years after she started the NGO. On the other hand, a woman running an NGO providing juridical advice to help pregnant women to keep their jobs, however closed her NGO as she felt pressure from the authorities.²⁷

A female pastor is the head of an Alliance consisting of a group of NGOs devoted to helping socially marginalised people. Included in this alliance is an NGO for children of drug addicts as well as a religious rehabilitation centre for women in vulnerable situations.²⁸ Being a pastor has helped her to run activities with the help of donations and voluntary work.

In one city, an NGO leader describes how she has built her personal networks of women working in the social sphere, among whom are state officials in power positions, social workers, and others working in state financed social centers and NGOs. Their collaboration is based on trust in persons rather than trust in organizations. She gets clients from the women's crisis center, for example those who have been subject to violence with whom she can work through her own project 'hotline', for which she has received a small presidential grant. She says she knows exactly how to formulate her grant applications.

You have to write that you are promoting "family values"...Nobody wants to finance a programme for drug users.²⁹

Another NGO is working with women in prison on a contract with prison authorities. Once a week a doctor from their organization is going to the female prison to take blood tests of inmates in order to secure that they do not have tuberculosis. Earlier they had financing from international organizations. Although they now receive some small funding from the state, they must rely mostly on voluntary work. Most of the 10-15 persons working for this NGO have other jobs.

²⁴ Interview with leader of women's council, May 2011.

²⁵ Interview with lawyer contracted by an NGO, regional capital, December 2016.

²⁶ Interview with two employees of a social NGO, city August 2019.

²⁷ Interview with lawyer in a city. She told how the security service broke into her apartment and took her computer. She went to court and got it back. The same thing happened again. However, the third time it happened, she gave up and simply closed her NGO (interview August 2019).

²⁸ At a meeting with the female pastor and eight female former drug addicts, of whom three were former prisoners, we heard the stories of women who explained that they had no other place to go. A young woman was happy that she had been advised to come to this place where she could get one of the eight beds in a room and a pair of boots after she was released from prison (interview February 2019).

²⁹ Interview with NGO leader city, February 2019. Eight women are working for her project; they share a desk and a copy machine in the small office of the city's women's council.

Amartya Sen (1984) has raised two important points: access to assets and empowerment, connecting agency to the issue of empowering people. According to this idea, social services should seek ways of empowering people. This requires agency of the benefit recipient based on his or her own perceptions of what they need. The way to help socially vulnerable women is through empowerment: what they need is not four meals per day, but a job.³⁰ Women in social services or local administration try to solve social issues, often outside of their formal tasks at work. But it is still mostly about charity rather than empowerment. It has been underlined how despite all the problems with the functioning of the system, there are local tendencies towards collaboration between women inside and outside of administration, who try to find ways to go forward. Interviews tell about women who are responsible for social welfare and how they must find sponsors for their regular activities by themselves. To increase the chance of obtaining a presidential grant, patriotism is included in the agenda. They are combining old networks from the Soviet time and new ones with women organising non-governmental organizations. Women in civic organizations use contacts to authorities and donors and apply for project funding to try to create resources. New ways of organizing social welfare can be detected, which is opening up opportunities for empowerment processes.

Reflections

The divided view on women's role from the Soviet past is also reflected in contemporary Russia. There are differences in opinions among women as to whether they should support 'going back to traditional values' or if they should work for another agenda. This is reflected in the different responses to the conservative turn. Agency combining both resistance to and acceptance of the conservative turn in gender policy have been observed. This indicates that rather than confrontation or complete subordination, it is sometimes possible to find a balance between the two.

This article has highlighted how women work across networks to solve social problems and how social media is contributing to this networking. Women in social services or local administration try to solve social issues, often outside of their formal tasks at work. One way is to collaborate with NGOs who can apply for presidential grants. Presidential grants are constructed to support state policies, and this means, however, that these are also targeted towards projects that promote family values, meaning that perhaps the socially marginalized women are not likely to be included. Rather than stating aims in terms of human rights, social rights or gender equality, NGOs have to 'frame activities' to promote family values and patriotic aims.

This paper has also highlighted how the conservative turn in gender policy might contribute to a social marginalization of women in two ways. First, a deterioration of women's rights in Russia might reinforce a downward spiral for those who have crossed the threshold to poverty. Secondly, the focus of social policy on promoting family values and increasing birth rates may imply that there are not enough resources to combat poverty and social marginalization of women.

³⁰ Interview with NGO leader, city, June 2020.

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