
November 2021

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Recommended Citation

Marina, Pisklakova-Parker and Olga, Efanova (2021). The Influence of Gender Stereotypes on the Growth of Gender Inequality and Domestic Violence in Russia in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(11), 31-41.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss11/4>

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The Influence of Gender Stereotypes on the Growth of Gender Inequality and Domestic Violence in Russia in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Pisklakova-Parker Marina¹, Efanova Olga²

Abstract

The present article is concerned with the influence of gender stereotypes on gender inequality and violence against women in modern Russia as well as the response of government institutions and civil society organisations to domestic violence incidents under lockdown. Conclusions on the role of stereotypes in the growth of inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic are based on findings of the research carried out by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) and the Institute of Socio-Economic Studies of Population of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed profound vulnerabilities concerning the state of women and exacerbated the current issues of gender discrimination. Today, discrimination has become obvious, and, to a certain degree, the state has recognised its prevalence in the labour market as well as in the areas of political activities and career advancement. However, existence of gender discrimination is still negated when it comes to issues of violence against women and reproductive rights. In general, the measures that have been implemented that aim to reduce women's vulnerability are fragmentary and inadequate.

Keywords: Gender equality, Gender violence, Gender studies, Gender stereotypes, Russia.

Introduction

According to the Global Gender Gap Index ranking published by the World Economic Forum (WEF), the situation in Russia is getting worse. For instance, in 2020, Russia fell from 75th to 81st. According to the World Bank Group project "Women, Business and the Law" which collected data on the laws and regulations that restrict women's economic opportunities carried out in 2020, in 2019, Russia was ranked 122nd out of 190 and then fell to 116th out of 187 (Uchitel, 2020).³

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed profound vulnerabilities concerning the state of women and exacerbated the current issues of gender discrimination. Today, discrimination has become obvious, and, to a certain degree, the state has recognised its prevalence in the labour market as well as in the areas of political activities and career advancement. However, existence of gender discrimination is still negated when it comes to issues of violence against women and reproductive

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³ <https://pedagog-prof.org/novosti/18-sentyabrya-2020-goda-vpervye-otmechaetsya-mezhdunarodnyj-den-ravnoj-oplaty-truda>

rights. In general, the measures that have been implemented that aim to reduce women's vulnerability are fragmentary and inadequate.

The main reasons for discrimination are the revival and reinforcement of gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes in the collective consciousness. Beliefs adhered both by policy makers at the decision-making level and the general public lead to contradictions in social policy. On the one hand, policy makers take measures in terms of empowerment of women in the labour market, inter alia by means of shortening the list of professions in which women's employment is restricted. For instance, since 2021, women drivers can be hired by the Moscow metro again, following recent changes in Russian legislation prohibiting women from many professions. On the other hand, promotion of gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices in terms of government calls for strengthening of traditional family values is contributing to the vulnerability of women. Worldwide, women, above all others, experienced the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to men, they are responsible for a greater amount of household work, and women prevalently suffer from domestic violence. Many nations around the world, including Russia, did not address these issues soon enough. Therefore, today, in the COVID-19 pandemic, we face negative effects of widespread gender discrimination and violence against women.

Influence of Gender Stereotypes on the Persistence of Gender Inequality

According to the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), 78.8 million females live in the country (54%). Women are less included in the economy than men are. For instance, in 2019, 55.4% of the women had jobs while 70.6% of the employed population were men (Rosstat, 2020). One of the problems faced by women when it comes to career advancement is the gender pay gap. Women earn 28% less than men with the same skill level.

In Russia, the most influential factors that define the status of women are gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes. According to findings of the NAFI Research Centre study sponsored by the Council of the Eurasian Women's Forum under the Federation Council of the Russian Federation and by Google:

- 71% of Russians share the opinion that a woman fulfils her highest mission when she becomes a good wife and a mother;
- The majority of women (89%) believe that a man should provide for the family while only 45% of women agree with the statement that women should financially sustain themselves;
- Though most married Russians (55%) state that the most responsible decisions are made by both partners, in one third of the families (29%) the important decisions are made by a man alone and only in 15% of families the women are the responsible decision-makers;
- One third of Russians (32%) believe that a woman must decide between a professional career and a family, and this figure is even higher among parents (NAFI, 2020).

Russia is one of the few countries where modernization processes of a family institution go back about a century. Destruction of hierarchal institutions caused by socialist transformations could not fail to affect the family. However, a major purpose of women's liberation from the power of men (a spouse or a father) within the family institution was the expansion of human resources

that were necessary for industrialization and later for resolution of the other problems that resulted from the construction of socialism. However, it did not free women from their household chores and childbirth. For instance, "a contract of the working mother" was prevailing during the entire Soviet era; that meant a double workload imposed on women who had to take on simultaneously a full working day, upbringing of their children, and unpaid household labour. When entering into marriage, young women and men were driven by priority of family and motherhood values, as in the public spotlight the latter was considered a woman's natural destiny and her social duty to the country.

Today, despite the fact that the former paradigms are no longer supported due to collapse of the Soviet regime, they still have influence with women and men. A choice between career advancement and childbirth are becoming a normative discussion topic and perceived choice. At the same time, a growing number of scholars are concluding that the nature of certain social and demographic processes can be studied in great detail at the family level as integral organisms joined by blood ties and common life manifestations, but not at the level of individuals.

Today, it is impossible to speak about a single standard family model. In recent decades in Russia, a range of various family models replaced the Soviet family model such as "the working mother" that used to be common for all population groups. Today, the young people are ready for experimenting in their personal lives.

In today's society, variation is intrinsic to gender interaction in the family and marriage. In Russia, social changes of the past twenty years made a controversial impact on the gender order. On the one hand, there is a deep involvement of women in the market sector as they are expanding it on equal terms with men. Scholars recognize that the market encouraged employment and economic claims of women of which a considerable number were able to adapt themselves to changed conditions and use new opportunities for their self-fulfilment in the areas of business and self-employment. According to the Unified State Register of Subjects of Small and Medium Entrepreneurship, including micro-enterprises, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women owned 1.8 million of 5.9 million business companies and individual enterprises, which is one third of Russian small and medium businesses. However, the total ratio of women heading companies as CEO is only 20%, and this indicator has not changed for the last several years. This is 4.5 times higher than a respective worldwide average index, while in Europe, the ratio of CEO women is 35% (Petrova, 2020).

On the other hand, the overall gender inequality rate remains rather high. It is rooted in persisting gender stereotypes, which came in full force under lockdown from March to May 2020. Findings of the Russia nationwide study "Gender dimension of socio-demographic dynamics in modern Russia"⁴ carried out by the Institute of Socio-Economic Studies of Population of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ISESP FCTAS RAS) prove that two thirds of respondents (64%) share the opinion that the family is the main area of women's self-fulfilment (Table 1).

⁴ The study was carried out at the end of April 2020. The sample size was 600 people 18 years or older. Respondents' group included residents of 73 subjects of the Russian Federation. Исследование проведено в конце апреля 2020 г. Объем выборки составил 600 человек, в возрасте 18 лет и старше. Опрошены жители 73 субъектов РФ.

Table 1: The Opinions of Men and Women Regarding the Main Area of Women's Self-fulfilment (%)

<i>Do you personally agree with the statement that women should take better care of their families than their careers?</i>	Men	Women	Total
Yes	<i>70.5</i>	<i>58.4</i>	64.0
No	29.5	41.6	36.0

Source: Findings of the research carried out by ISESP FCTAS RAS, 2020

It should be emphasized that this rooted stereotype is more common among men compared to its prevalence among women. The table data shows that two thirds of male respondents share this stereotype while a little over 50% of female respondents support this view.

However, recent sociological research findings show that a ratio of supporters of a stereotype regarding the family as the main area of women's self-fulfilment is gradually coming down. According to findings of the study carried out by Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) in 2014, this view was shared by a larger proportion of respondents (72.0%) (VTsIOM, 2014). Russians' mental shift towards a lesser domination of the abovementioned stereotype that took place in recent years indicates progression of the Russian family from a traditional model of authoritarian family, with its rigid female roles of home keepers and male breadwinners, to a modern family mainly based on equality of spouses and cooperation within the family.

Evolution of gender relations on a course for equality contributes to the rising of similar tendencies to transformation of the family institution. The phenomenon mistaken for today's family crisis is in fact a transformation of the traditional patriarchal family model. Despite the controversial nature of its extinction, the family institution is developing in the context of the formation of gender partnership and tolerance being conditions of creating a harmonious society with equal rights and opportunities of individuals regardless of their gender.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Revealed Gender Inequality in the Family

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the world and all spheres of life in society. Still, pandemic manifestations influenced various population groups in different ways. For example, income inequality resulted in different opportunities of families living under lockdown as well as in the availability of quality food and medications. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened and therefore brought worldwide problems related to gender inequality to the surface. From the perspective of the combination of various factors, women turned out to be one of the most vulnerable groups. For instance, they make up the majority of health care professionals. According to the Ministry of Health Care of the Russian Federation, in Russia women make up over 71% of

doctors and 95% of paramedical personnel respectively⁵ (Fatykhova, 2020). This means that women are oftentimes the first who contact infected patients⁶.

However, the existing patriarchal traditions in the family along with gender inequality in society created a situation where women bear a disproportionate workload in the homes. According to research carried out by ISESP FCTAS RAS, the volume of unpaid household work performed by women in the homes under lockdown went up an average of one-and-a-half-times (Table 2) (Efanova, Pisklakova-Parker, 2020).

Table 2: The Opinions of Men and Women on the Number of Hours Spent on Household Work per Week (%)

Number of hours	<i>Before April 2020</i>				<i>In April 2020</i>			
	Yourself		Your partner (wife / husband)		Yourself		Your partner (wife / husband)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
0 hours	4.8	1.0	2.1	13.6	3.2	1.5	2.7	18.9
Up to 7 hours a week	53.5	24.8	32.1	58.7	40.1	18.4	26.7	44.7
From 8 to 14 hours	24.1	35.4	27.8	15.5	31.0	32.0	29.4	17.0
From 15 to 24 hours	11.8	21,8	22.5	7.8	17.6	19.9	21.9	12.1
More than 24 hours	5.9	17.0	15.5	4.4	8.0	28.2	19.3	7.3

The number of hours spent on childcare increased as well (Table 3).

⁵ According to Rosstat, in all areas of labor and among all categories of personnel, women's wages are 30 percent lower than men's. Women quantitatively predominate over men in seven out of eighteen areas—trade, hotels and catering, financial and insurance activities, education, health and social services, cultural activities, and the provision of other types of services. But, for example, in the field of education, the number of men grows with the age of the students: 99 percent of teachers working with preschoolers are women, while in the teaching staff in higher educational institutions (more prestigious positions) men are already 42 percent. And, fourthly, this is female gender socialization: in Russian families it is customary that as soon as a girl reaches preschool or primary school age, she becomes a “mother’s helper”. If the family has younger children, the eldest daughter often turns into a free nanny. As a result, women develop a heightened sense of responsibility, coupled with grooming skills. What they do best, they continue into adulthood, choosing medicine, social work, or preschool. There are few men among the junior and middle nursing staff; the work of a nurse is considered “female”: “Women are more stable, accustomed to caring, more sympathetic, but when necessary, they are firm (Svetlana Kovalenko, Larisa Zhukova, “We are treated like servants”). (See also: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2020/01/30/stickyfloor/>, <https://zeh.media/zhizn/seksizm/264375-zhenshchina-vrach>)

⁶ <https://lenta.ru/articles/2020/01/30/stickyfloor/>

Table 3: The Opinions of Men and Women on the Number of Hours Spent Recently on Childcare (%)

Number of hours	<i>Before April 2020</i>				<i>In April 2020</i>			
	Yourself		Your partner (wife / husband)		Yourself		Your partner (wife / husband)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
0 hours	3.3	2.6	2.2	5.2	3.3	1.7	2.2	9.5
Up to 7 hours a week	24.4	19.0	7.8	40.5	12.2	6.9	7.8	22.4
From 8 to 14 hours	30.0	19.0	23.3	25.0	28.9	16.4	17.8	24.1
From 15 to 24 hours	16.7	12.9	27.8	13.8	24.4	13.8	23.3	22.4
More than 24 hours	25.6	46.6	38.9	15.5	31.1	61.2	48.9	21.6

However, keep in mind that half of female respondents (49.2%) worked remotely while 20.6% of women involved in the survey had to go out to work normally. Considering this, it is fair to say that under lockdown the women's work burden increased manifold.

In addition, VTsIOM sociological research findings as of August 15, 2020, show that under lockdown mothers were more involved in childcare in comparison to other family members. Most respondents who have minor children mentioned this fact as well (Chernova, Shpakovskaya, 2020). In 2020, due to non-availability of childcare facilities during the lockdown when kindergartens and learning centres closed, switching to distant learning, a ban on sports and cultural events, and the work of maintaining a settled family lifestyle disproportionately fell on women's shoulders. As a result, aside from household duties and childcare, women had to take on extra responsibilities regarding the education, development, and entertainment of the children. Thus, lack of external support revealed the full extent of gender imbalances in Russian families that thereby considerably increased an already large workload imposed on women.

Gender inequality in the family became more visible under lockdown and showed the negative impact of gender stereotypes on women. In Russia, men and society still believe that the main male role is financial family provision while helping women in household chores and childcare as necessary is a subordinate responsibility. In other words, men consider their role in performing the household work an additional one. Findings of the study on the state of fatherhood in Russia carried out by ISESP RAS with the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in 2016 is further proof of this (Rimashevskaya et al., 2016).⁷ Most fathers involved in the survey (81.6%) recognized financial family provision as their main responsibility (Table 4).

⁷ The survey was conducted in the Republic of Karelia, the Russian Federation. Sample size is 1,000 fathers, age 18 – 49, who live together with their children.

Table 4: Statements Providing Self-assessment of the Fathers' Role in the Family (%)

<i>Do you agree with the following statements?</i>	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
I spend too little time with my children due to my work.	54.2	34.6	7.2	4.0
I would agree to work less if it meant that I could spend more time with my children.	33.8	38.4	19.1	8.8
My main responsibility is providing for the family.	81.6	10.9	3.8	3.8
My role in caring for my children is mostly as a helper for my wife when necessary.	48.9	37.7	5.3	8.1

Almost half of the men (48.9%) believe that their role in caring for their children and the household is mostly as a helper for their wives when necessary. This attitude is far from engaged fatherhood, as this opinion proves fathers' fragmentary involvement in the daily care of the family. So far, the proportion of men that consider their involvement in childcare equal to that of their partners/wives is a little over one third of the sample or 37.7%.

An embedded stereotype of a male breadwinner role encourages men to favour work at the price of the family. Over 54.2% of fathers admit that they spend little time with their children due to work, and only one third of fathers (33.8%) said that they would agree to work less if they were able to spend more time with their children. It is also important to bear in mind that almost one-fifth of respondents (19.5%) could not decide on their answers to the question regarding willingness to work less if they could spend more time with their children. Perhaps this group of men was unable to provide a precise answer due to their strained circumstances and fear of lower incomes if they worked less. Perhaps if they had an opportunity to work part-time with the wage maintenance, their answer would have been "yes". Widespread conservative employers' attitudes and unfriendly laws prevent men from balancing work with family responsibilities, particularly in the situation of a child's illness. Meanwhile, it is when children are sick that they are in critical need of close contacts with parents in order to overcome physical pain and frustration.

According to several surveys, men's reluctance to be involved in the household chores and childcare has caused and is still causing high divorce rates nationwide. Sometimes, due to patriarchal attitudes toward family roles and traditional views of masculinity, it is easier for a man to break up with his wife than change his model of behaviour in the home. However, in the context of global transformations in the sphere of employment and the state of the world market, an essential proportion of men must become involved in household chores and the family matters more than ever. Rises in unemployment, offers of work-at-home/online jobs and flexible working hours will probably expand the scope of men's household activities. Moreover, men's falling incomes will likely violate their breadwinner role.

Increased Domestic Violence Rates in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated violence against women. According to the UN study, during the pandemic gender violence rates went up on average by 33%.

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres urged all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women and girls a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19. In his appeal, he said:

For many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest. In their own homes... Today I appeal for peace in homes around the world. We know lockdowns and quarantines are essential to suppressing COVID-19. But they can trap women with abusive partners. Over the past weeks as economic and social pressures and fear have grown, we have seen a horrifying global surge in domestic violence. In some countries, the number of women calling support services has doubled. Meanwhile, healthcare providers and police are overwhelmed and understaffed. Local support groups are paralyzed or short of funds. Some domestic violence shelters are closed; others are full. I urge all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19.' (Guterres, 2020)

Lockdowns and quarantine deteriorated the state of women who are subject to violence by reducing access to emergency services for survivors. Most shelters and crisis centres for women report the reduction in helpline calls from the survivors. According to Italian activists, many victims felt unable to call because they were being watched and heard by their abusers and therefore, they preferred using special apps. Under lockdown and self-isolation restrictions, many governments are coming up with innovative strategies that help women get access to urgent assistance and leave their places of self-isolation. For example, in Spain they launched an app with geolocation functionality that helps women to get access to emergency counselling services. In Argentina, victims can alert local pharmacists in situations of violence. In France, they set up temporary support centres outside supermarkets while hotels provide shelters for those who need to leave abusive partners during the lockdown. In Trento, Italy, in situations of domestic violence, the abuser must leave the family home, and not the victim. Moreover, in some countries women are permitted to violate lockdown when they need to report domestic violence (Adyrkhaeva, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed rates of domestic violence against women in Russia. Thus, according to the Russian human rights commissioner Tatyana Moskalkova, since the 10th of April 2020, reported cases of domestic violence in Russia have more than doubled from roughly 6,054 to 13,000 in a month (RIA Novosti, 2020). However, a press release from the Russia Ministry of Interior as of 14 May 2020 states that "in April 2020 the number of reported offenses in the context of family and domestic relations reduced by 9% compared to the data of April 2019. Facts of intended grievous bodily harm reduced by 14.6% while incidents of intended medium and minor harm have been cut by 17.1% and 3.3% respectively." Representatives of CSOs relate this to the fact that survivors either find filing complaints with the police unhelpful or fear escalation of violence due to lack of restraining orders that might protect women from contact with the perpetrators (Адырхаева, 2020).

In this respect, under lockdown all the burden of responding to domestic violence incidents lay on civil society organisations. Thus, in July 2020, seven women's human rights organisations, Zona Prava, the Anna Centre for the prevention of violence, the Consortium of Women's non-governmental organisations, Russia Legal Initiative, the You Are Not Alone network for mutual

support between women, the Sisters Centre, and Kitez Center, wrote a joint report on domestic violence in Russia under lockdown (Andreeva, 2020). The CSOs' data provided in the report show that the number of referrals from survivors increased in comparison to the numbers documented in the period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in February 2020, 2,050 women called the "ANNA" Centre's All-Russian helpline for women affected by domestic violence. Compared to the February numbers, in March after the lockdown was imposed this number increased to 2,437, while in April it increased by one-third, reaching 2,682, and jumped up by 74% in May when this number grew to 3,563. And 69.5% of women who called the helpline emphasized escalation of violence perpetrated by their partners under the self-isolation regime and quarantine restrictions.

From March to May 2020, the Sisters Centre was providing distant counseling services to the victims of domestic and sexual violence via e-mail or by phone. They received 481 messages altogether via e-mail, while in the preceding year the total number of messages was 316. The centre also recorded twice the number of appeals in April and May 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. The women's mutual assistance network "Ty Ne Odn" (You're not alone) reported 1,352 calls for help in April 2020 and 2,038 in May. Previously, the average number of calls per month was between 500 and 700.

Gaps in the response to domestic violence in Russia are based on a range of factors, the chief being lack of specific laws determining the crime itself as well as the measures of restraint and prevention of domestic violence. However, after lockdown was imposed, the women's human rights organisations sent an open letter to the federal government of the Russian Federation, and State Duma deputy Oksana Pushkina sent the appeal to the Russian Government. That is when the government began to take measures to protect victims during the lockdown. Thus, it was announced that survivors of domestic violence would be exempt of punishment for violating quarantine restrictions. In addition, on the federal "Gosuslugi" Public Services Portal federal authorities published some general instructions on how to deal with domestic violence. It is noteworthy that this was framed as a 'crisis situation', but not 'domestic violence'. Thus, the website says, "If you have faced danger to life and health, it is necessary to take the following measures":

1. Take the child along and leave the place of residence.
2. When the unlawful acts are committed against your children or yourself, complain to the law enforcement agencies.
3. Do not get into contact with your abusive partner. Do not share information on your place of stay with anyone.
4. After getting injured try to seek medical assistance in a first-aid station.
5. Stay in a safe place. If possible, stay with the relatives of friends, or seek help in a crisis centre. (Gosuslugi Public Services Portal, 2020)

However, there was no information about shelters or crisis centres on Gosuslugi Portal. Thus, the measures taken were rather sporadic and in part inconsistent.

Conclusion

The term 'domestic violence' is relatively new to Russian society as it came up for public discussion for the first time in the 1990s. Perception of the severity of the consequences of this

phenomenon is slowly going on amidst the decisive transition period and rise in social problems such as population decline, poverty, unemployment, homelessness among children, migration, trafficking in human beings, as well as increased crime, corruption, and substance abuse.

At the same time, it is important to note the existence of crucial factors that are the obstacles to exploring and combatting this phenomenon. This is a high latency and prevalent societal stereotypes together with a range of other crucial social reasons (lack of specific law and shelters) and cultural factors (patriarchal traditions as well as local customs and traditions relating to men, particularly in the North Caucasus). This determines the existence of high rates of violence against women in the family that is extremely dangerous for not only the individual, but also the entire social system. Underestimation of the serious consequences of domestic violence poses a threat to society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the need for adoption of an adequate domestic violence law, elaboration of statutory remedies for protecting victims of domestic violence, and a comprehensive approach to the prevention of domestic violence in Russia. Lack of such an approach puts women at a greater risk and limits their enjoyment of human rights.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fact that persisting traditional gender stereotypes cause a spike in gender inequality and domestic violence. Attempts to conceal the rise in gender inequality in the family and escalation of domestic violence against women under the COVID-19 pandemic prevent resilience to its negative effects and thereby contribute to the deteriorating status of women and to hindering society from making progress towards gender equality.

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