



CIT 226 - Cross National Perspectives On Women's Movement

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Women's situation before and after the October Revolution

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to give information about the effects of women in the October Revolution. In this study, women's rights will be mentioned before and after the revolution. The study will also provide detailed information about women taking an active role in the revolution. Women, who played an active role in the revolution and the subsequent process, interacted with Marxist thought and feminist thought. As a result of these interactions, women have gained unprecedented rights. With these achievements, Soviet women influenced feminist movements in other countries and pioneered other women in the world.

Key Words: October Revolution, Feminism, Women, Soviet Union, Gender equality.

Introduction

The Marxist thought that started with Karl Marx combined with the theories of Vladimir Lenin succeeded in overthrowing the Russian Tsarism. Women who struggled with many problems such as gender equality and class separation before the revolution were the ones who struggled the most after the revolution. Women such as Nadejda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, Maria Ulyanova were at the forefront of the revolution and became the women who shaped the revolution. Women who shaped the revolution with their success also contributed to the reforms made after the revolution. Shaping these reforms from a feminist point of view, the Soviet Union Women achieved many rights much earlier than their fellows in the world. The Soviet Union, founded with communist ideals, was abolished on December 26, 1991. However, women's rights gained by revolution still lead the struggles of women all over the world.

The Status of Women in Tsarist Russia

In Tsarist Russia, women lacked entirely right in society and in the family. The women were under the yoke of pressure from husband, religion and Tsarist power. Women did not have any political rights and many professions, especially public and government jobs, were prohibited to women. Only 10/1 of women knew how to read and write. The most common occupation for women was maid service. Half of the working women generally worked with landowners as servants. Only 15% of working women worked in the industry. Women working in industry were textile and apparel enterprises, where wages were lowest and working conditions were the heaviest. Even when women did the same job as men, they could only get 3/5 of their wages.¹ Women could not find themselves a place especially in cultural life. There were few private vocational schools in the country taught vocational training, sewing and embroidery for women. There were few private vocational schools in the country taught vocational training, sewing, and embroidery for women. Even the primary education of women was very difficult. It was difficult for women to get primary education aside from secondary and higher education. The institutions where working women could leave their children were inadequate. Women who lived without long working hours, low wages, living conditions, all kinds of rights, social security, and work security were also

¹ Linda Edmondson, *Women's Rights, Gender and Citizenship in Tsarist Russia, 1860–1920: the Question of Difference*, London, 2001, p.153-165.

constantly humiliated.² Tsarist Russia was a least developed country, although it was quite rich in natural and underground.

The number of women working before the revolution was 5 million. The majority of women worked in agriculture. The situation of women working in villages was not different from other women. Despite working late into the evening, they lived in misery. In Tsarist Russia the state owned the land and gave it to the peasants to cultivate the land. Sometimes, this land was shared among the peasants. Women were not entitled to the lands distributed. Women were economically dependent on her husband, father or brother.³ Tsarist Russia was a very large country in terms of land. There was a material and cultural gap between the European part of the country and the communities living in Far Asia. Women were humiliated, deemed worthless, and oppressed under the pressure of religion and superstitions, especially in the Eastern regions. In some areas, women could be bought and sold, tortured or even killed. Men were often able to marry more than one woman. The women lived as a house slave in the cities and an agricultural slave in the rural settlements. Women who started working in the field before the sunrise was collecting cotton, milking cows, looking at animals, cooking, and sewing clothes. And they were doing all this work using power with primitive tools. Almost all life was based on women's labor, but the products of this labor belonged to men. Women had no say in most areas. Women almost completely lacked the right to inheritance. Two women were required to testify against a man before a law.⁴

The Place of Women in Social Struggle

Women who were in opposing movements against tsarism were generally intellectual women from wealthy families. These women, who have a good education and who speak English, were among the domestic political organizations. These women fought against Tsarism and despotic rule. With the development of the working class movement in Tsarist Russia, women began to take a more active part in this movement. Workers' actions began in Moscow in 1872 and in Petersburg in 1874. In 1895, women working in the cigarette factory in Petersburg started a riot against the reduction of wages. In the same year, the League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class was founded under the leadership of

² Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905–1917*, Pennsylvania, 2010, p.41-44.

³ Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930*, New Jersey, 1991, p.199-205.

⁴ Marianna Muravyeva, *Between Law and Morality: Violence against Women in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, 2012, p.209-212.

Lenin.⁵ There are 4 women, including Nadejda Krupskaya, under the administration of the Union. The Union organized the textile workers' strike, which started in 1896 under the leadership of women workers.⁶ In the 1890s, Marxist organizations started to emerge in the growing working class movement in Russia. The number of women workers in some local organizations in Petersburg was quite high. Some of these women workers quickly became leaders.

The formation of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party

The League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class made a big impact with its strike in 1896. 30,000 textile workers, mostly women, participated in the strike. In the face of the strike, the tsarist government had to issue a ban that restricts working hours to 11.5 hours. There was no restriction on working hours before this ban. In light of the experience of the Struggle Union, Nadezhda Krupskaya published the manifesto of the "The Woman Worker" in 1900.⁷ This manifesto addressed the living and working conditions of working women in Russia and set out their political struggle duties. This illegally published manifesto counts the Bolsheviks' first political attitudes towards the women's question. The Russian Social Democratic Workers Party was founded in 1898 under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin. In the party program, which was accepted at the 2nd Congress held in 1903, ideas about the equality of women and men and the protection against capitalist exploitation were also created. This program remained the program of the Bolsheviks until 1919. With the deepening of the economic crisis in 1903-1904, the revolutionary movement gradually increased. Strikes in Petersburg and Moscow turned into a struggle for resistance over time. Workers carrying the entire burden of the economic crisis were growing day by day in hatred against the Tsarist regime.⁸

1905 Russian Revolution

In 1905, workers and peasants launched an armed uprising against the Tsarist Regime. Women also took their places on all fronts of this uprising. Women workers and women agricultural workers were actively participating in the class struggle. On the workers' march

⁵ Gökhan Atılğan, 100. Yılında Ekim Devrimi, İstanbul, 2017, p.384-385.

⁶ Gerald D.Surh, 1905 in St. Petersburg Labor, Society, and Revolution, 1989, p.53-55.

⁷ N.K. Krupskaya, The Woman Worker, 2017, Retrieved from: <https://www.scottish-communists.org.uk/files/the-woman-worker.pdf>. Accessed May 31, 2020.

⁸ Yunus Ekici, Bolşevik İhtilalinin Ortaya Çıkması ve Sebepleri, Elazığ, 2017, Retrieved from: <http://static.dergipark.org.tr/article-download/2f2a/8271/3818/59f05e313bed3.pdf?>. Accessed May 31, 2020.

on January 9, 1905, fire was opened by soldiers at the order of the Tsar. After the attack, in which more than 1000 workers died, nothing happened in the country as before.⁹ After this event, which went down in history as the Bloody Sunday, mass strikes spread in the country. The 1905 Revolution influenced the feminist movement, as it affects people of all classes. "Union for Women's Equality" was established in February 1905. The union fought for the right of women to vote. The Union later broke up due to the ideological separation it faced. In 1905-1907, while the Bolsheviks struggled for class equality, on the other hand, they organized rallies and meetings where the demands of working women were raised. Between 1908 and 1912, a very oppressive period passed during the Pyotr Stolypin period. Some of the Bolshevik women leaders were arrested, while others had to flee abroad. Despite these conditions, groups aimed at organizing, especially among women workers, were created. These groups, which played a central role in the acquisition of more worker women, also took an active role after the revolution. During this period, the proportion of women in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was around 15%.

The first newspaper of the Bolsheviks for women workers, *Rabotnitsa*, published its first issue on March 8, 1913. The editorial team of the newspaper had a staff of Bolshevik women leaders. This staff consisted of leaders such as Nadezhda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, Anna Ulyanova. *Rabotnitsa* is a magazine that unites the struggles of working women and looks at life from the perspective of the working class. The magazine struggled against the patriarchal structure that continued even after the revolution in the Eastern Republics and pioneered the improvement of women's living and working conditions. Thanks to the publications in the magazine, a worker woman working in the factory and women working in agriculture or living in poverty due to war were able to come together.¹⁰

Towards the October Revolution

With the February Revolution that started in 1917, the Tsarist regime was destroyed. Women textile workers played a leading role in the struggle. In this period, women were looking for rights not only for working women, but also for women waiting in the bread queue and working in agricultural fields. On February 25, the streets were filled with thousands of demonstrators. The soldiers opened fire on the people who could not find food. Disobedience among the soldiers started with this incident with many casualties and injuries.

⁹ Moira Donald, *Reinterpreting Revolution in Twentieth-Century Europe*, 2001, p.42-48.

¹⁰ Dorothea L. Meek, *A Soviet Women's Magazine*, 1952, p.32-40.

¹¹ As a result of the fall of the tsarist regime, a dual power emerged. On the one hand, Kerensky's interim government was on the other, the Soviets of Workers and Soldiers. The Kerensky Government did not fulfill its promises to workers. In contrast, Lenin demanded equal vote for all male and female citizens. Mass and large strikes and the search for rights continued. But with the onset of World War, Rabotnitsa was banned. Women decided to support internationalism against war. The Bolsheviks were against the imperialist war and created campaigns for "peace, bread and freedom".¹² The Bolsheviks triumphed out of the struggle, and under their leadership Soviet power was established. After the October Revolution, all the old laws on women's inequality were lifted and legal equality of women and men was achieved. Decree on the protection of women's labor and mothers was declared 4 days after the revolution. Thus, for the first time in history, women's economic, political and legal equality was achieved. The Communist Party stressed that the main task was to really make women equal in every sphere of social life and to mobilize everyone to solve it. The Soviet woman's becoming an important power in society could only be achieved by achieving equality in every field.

Women's Equality in the Soviet Union

The Soviet government, trying to ensure the equality of women in all spheres of life, passed an equal pay law for equal work after the revolution. In land distribution to the peasants, the method of giving to individuals, not families, was followed. Thus, peasant women could own their land. In this way, pushing the woman back was eliminated by law. Schools and courses have been launched to raise the cultural level of women and enable them to have a profession. Nurseries were established in which women can entrust their children to participate in social production.¹³ In order to facilitate women's lives, centers such as dining halls and laundries were opened in the neighborhoods. These actions also served as a means of attracting women to the organization of social life.

In 1918, the average wage of women was only half of the average wage of men. This was because the woman's condition and labor were not qualified. The first and most important step taken to change this situation was the campaign to promote readership and

¹¹ İrem Köker & Onur Erem, 1917: Dünyayı değiştiren devrimlerin yılı, 2017, Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/turkce/resources/idd-sh/russian_revolution_turkish. Accessed June 1, 2020.

¹² Tanel Vahisalu, History of Russia in 100 Minutes: A Crash Course For Beginners, 2017.

¹³ Mary Buckley, Women in the Soviet Union, 1981, Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1394929>. Accessed June 1, 2020.

writing. With a big campaign, reading and writing courses for women were opened in business, culture club and collective farms.¹⁴ With this campaign, the ratio of readers and writers was increased in the late 1930s. Before the Second World War, 7 years of compulsory education was launched in the whole country. In 1929, a general 7-hour practice was launched. In the industrial branch, where the working conditions were heavy, there were working hours between 6 and 4 hours.

Women who were completely away from political life were not in a position to exercise their political rights. Even the women who did not exercise their voting rights seemed to have a difficult situation. The ignorance that the old society inherited and the value and role of the woman forced to live inside the houses were just being understood. Soviet power fought a fierce struggle with this ignorance. In the country, a system of delegate meetings was also put in place to raise women's political development and to work in governing bodies. This system enabled the mass participation of workers and peasant women in Soviet work. With the new constitution that entered into force in 1936, the representation rate of women exceeded 30%. The goal is a 50% representation rate, but given the initial situation, it is clear that this is also a great success. In 1937, half a million women played an active role in Soviet government departments. The Soviet Government pursued a policy of including women in all areas of politics on the basis of equal rights and obligations, and in doing so, fought against male dominant attitudes.¹⁵

With a decree issued two months after the revolution, it was declared that the protection of the mother and child was directly the state's responsibility. Despite all the difficulties of the period, institutions and organizations started to be built for children all over the country. By 1918, the rate of infant and child deaths and maternal deaths at birth was quite high in the country. In the same year, a special decree was struggled against this problem. Studies have been carried out to provide birth support for every woman. In addition, women were granted rights on paid maternity leave. All kinds of health care in the country had to be given free of charge. In order for women to benefit from this service, doctors were also assigned to rural areas. But the greatest right that the Soviet Union provides to women is

¹⁴ Alice Erh-Soon Tay, *The Status of Women in the Soviet Union*, 1972, p.689-692. Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/839036>. Accessed June 1, 2020.

¹⁵ Usha K.B. *Political Empowerment of Women in Soviet Union and Russia: Ideology and Implementation*, 2005, p.145-150. Retrieved from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/002088170404200203?journalCode=isga>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

undoubtedly the freedom of abortion. In 1920, the state left the abortion to the initiative of the woman, even if there was no medical reason.¹⁶

After the revolution, the laws concerning the woman were radically changed. All laws that give women a subordinate position have been lifted. Especially the laws that exploit the position of the woman and make her legally unequal, that is, the laws related to divorce and children outside marriage. These laws were also part of the struggle against the influence of religious institutions on the family and marriage institution. Bigoted practices such as church marriage were abolished and only civil marriage was considered valid.¹⁷ The woman was given the right to divorce after the revolution. On the other hand, it was ensured that the religious weddings that had been chopped before the revolution were recognized, and the rights brought to women in this way were also valid for these women. One of the biggest innovations brought by decrees was to ensure that children born out of wedlock have equal rights with children born in wedlock before the law.¹⁸ Soviet law imposed strict penalties for women who are pregnant to not be employed and their wages should not be reduced.

Conclusion

While the Soviet government was building the foundations of a new society, there was a huge task. The government undertook a task such as the woman who has been left behind in the society for years to become equal individuals with men and ensure gender equality. The state enacted laws to make women equal individuals both socially, legally and economically, and made practical studies to make these laws come true. Women who had no rights in Tsarist Russia had many political rights after the revolution. Soviet women have been actively involved in every issue before and after the revolution. Women who were oppressed before the revolution and treated like a second-class human, became equal with men after the revolution. These rights were not gifted to women, women obtained these rights as a result of their struggle. With these struggles, women pioneered women in the other country with the rights they obtained under the conditions of the period. The rights gained by women after the

¹⁶ Mark Savage, *The Law of Abortion in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the People's Republic of China: Women's Rights in Two Socialist Countries*, 1988, p.1030-1037. Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1228777>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

¹⁷ Becky L. Glass and Margaret K. Stolee, *Family Law in Soviet Russia, 1917-1945*, 1987, p.899-900. Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/351982>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

¹⁸ Harold J. Berman, *Soviet Family Law in the Light of Russian History and Marxist Theory*, p.50-56. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4473&context=yjl>. Accessed June 3, 2020.

revolution are still not given to women in many countries of the world today. However, these rights continue to be gained with the rising voices of women's organizations.

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