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**SOCIO-CULTURAL LEISURE SPACE OF SOVIET WOMEN IN
1920S**

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Abstract

Based on the methodology of gender history, the history of everyday life and the history of leisure, the article discusses the issue of discrimination of Soviet women in the field of leisure in the 1920s. The authors assume that topicality of this research is determined by its lacking study, and additionally, by today's Russian realities, when problems of women's emancipation need solutions to face challenges similar to the ones of previous generations. The paper presents stereotypes of gender roles and leisure norms of a Soviet woman in the post-revolutionary socio-cultural environment in the 1920s. The results of the research showed that in everyday realities of a Soviet city in the 1920s, women were restricted in their opportunities to realize themselves in leisure. In the conditions of lower wage and the necessity to do household chores, women had no time and money for leisure. The Bolshevik slogan of women liberation was mainly of a declarative type. Actually, the government tried to regulate quite severely emancipation of Soviet women, who had to keep the balance between conventional patriarchal values, revolutionary ideas and everyday routine, which, in theory, granted the right to leisure, but gave no time, no money, no freedom in reality.

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Keywords: Communication strategies, sociocultural environment, communicative barriers, history of leisure, deviant leisure, soviet women in 1920s.



1. Introduction

The period of the 1920s in terms of the Soviet gender history and the history of everyday life attracts a lot of attention in the Russian and international scientific community. The main research issue is emancipation of Soviet women. Researchers often emphasize that the specific feature of the Soviet emancipation is in contradiction between declaration of women's liberation, encouragement of women for labor, public and political activity, and unwillingness, even in theory, of the Soviet power to liberate women from conventional spousal and maternal gender roles. According to the Bolshevik ideology, a "new" Russian woman, who was converted into Marxism and rejected many traditions and cultural habits of the past, had to carry out her nurturing and caring duties only without passing on conservative values of the Orthodox Church and peasant culture to her children (Haan, 1999, p. 444). Another peculiarity of the Soviet gender policy, stated in literature, is tight governmental control. The women's movement was considered only as part of the common class struggle (Harshman, 2016, p. 219; Hudson, 2017, p. 206), with emancipation having to be regulated by the political party, rather than women themselves. That was a major difference of the Soviet women's reality from the Western feminist movement. Publications on this issue also emphasize a "natural" type of emancipation, which was related to the growth of women's employment in industry and doing men's work in the period of the World War I and Civil Wars (Morozova, Troshina, 2016; Smith, 1994, p. 143). Besides, researchers focused on the activity of Bolshevik women, especially A. Kollontai, who promoted an attitude to sexuality and women's role in the society different from the conventional one (Goss, 2015, p. 8; Kulinich, 2010).

Another issue of feminine research on post-revolutionary Russia is regarding women as the reserve army of labor, which became extremely important at the end of the 1920s, when Stalin's plan of rapid industrialization was well under way. The plan could be implemented only in case the number of workers increased dramatically. These were women who had a key role in the growth and transformation of the working class. Consequently, the Soviet government started setting up creches and nurseries, which the country had lacked before (McKinney, 2004, p. 39). The reason for this was not to provide women with more leisure opportunities, but to use their working potential in the production industry.

Frequently, women in their struggle for emancipation faced communicative barriers related to realities of the traditional patriarchal culture. This resulted into gender discrimination in the family and in the workplace. Publications on these problems extensively cover issues of discrimination against working women – lower pay, social insecurity, sexist attitudes of male colleagues (Ewing, 2010; Bezguin, 2015; Goldman, 2010). The following social factors were regarded as discriminating for women: a role of a housewife, a patriarchal type of family, unequal division of household chores (Smith, 1884, p. 143). What could not be referred to real emancipation was a moralizing propaganda in imposing novel values on women, which historians tend to compare with the Orthodox patriarchal testament (Haan, 1999, p. 455).

2. Problem Statement

The historiographical analysis shows that the emphasis on the production function of women and the history of family prevents one from focusing on evolution and specifics of leisure in women's communication environment. Nowadays the history of leisure is one of the most popular historical

domains, closely connected with the “new cultural history”, history of everyday life, historical anthropology, microhistory, historical urban studies etc. The history of leisure represents an institutionalized, but still an under-developed area of the historical research. It has a lot of gaps which are worth filling, i.e. peculiarities of gender leisure in the 1920s. Researchers mostly focus on studying men’s leisure, considering women only in the context of their integration into conventional masculine practices – sports, political and public activity etc. The authors assume that topicality of this research is determined by its lacking study, and additionally, by today’s Russian realities, when problems of women’s emancipation need solutions to face challenges similar to the ones of previous generations.

3. Research Questions

The paper presents stereotypes of gender roles and leisure norms of a Soviet woman in the post-revolutionary socio-cultural environment in the 1920s.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to determine a framework of women’s leisure in a Soviet city in the 1920s, constraints on leisure development, state regulation, impact of early Soviet socio-cultural environment, gender and socio-cultural communicative barriers, to study reasons for the gap between leisure discourse and real leisure. A special attention is paid to primarily women’s forms of leisure which became deviant in the conditions of post-revolutionary cultural changes.

5. Research Methods

In their research, the authors turned to methods of the history of leisure, which is part of the “new cultural history”. Studying the history of leisure started a long time ago. However, the history of leisure was recognized as an academic science not until the early 1980s. In Russia, the history of leisure is a comparatively new, but fast-growing branch of history, which has confirmed its academic claims. This branch of history is very important for the hermeneutic analysis of the past, trying “to feel” and to realize ideological meanings, understanding, senses. Taking a significant part of the person’s life, leisure is important to seek worldview and ideals in different epochs; it affected social and cultural communication, as if ensuring access to new cultures. The history of leisure deals with the techniques of the power’s correcting ideology, collective consciousness. All this was especially relevant to the Russian history of the 1920s. Within the history of leisure, it is essential to use methods of deviant discourse, which include practices frowned upon or criticized by the society, even prosecuted. Referring to the 1920s, the most topical is the research of those forms of leisure which were regarded as deviant by the new government, and, consequently, resulted into the forced reorganization of daily routine practices. Besides, the paper is written using methods of the history of everyday life, genderology and feminology.

6. Findings

Studying the women's history of the 1920s, it is essential to focus on the structure of the working time that shows that gender segregation was so strong in leisure. According to the Soviet economist, S.G. Strumilin, in 1923-1924, a working family man had a rest (including time for a meal) amounting to 140.1 hours per month, housewives had a rest amounting to 131.1 hours per month, working women – 93 hours. However, women spent significantly more time on such leisure activities as visits and socializing, going to church, singing, music and dancing (Strumilin, 1982, p. 188). These were wage-earning women who ensured the maximum workload, also being “hearth keepers”. By 1924, their workday had been 14 hours 34 min (Strumilin, 1982, p. 188). The household chores accounted for 241.7 hours per month for women, whereas chores for men accounted for only 58.7. In the late 1920s, the government got interested in the mass involvement of women in the production industry, began setting up a great number of creches and nurseries: in 1932 the quantity of creches was more than 5 million, which exceeded their quantity 20 times in 1928. The number of nurseries increased from 2155 in 1927 to 25700 in 1934-1935 (McKinney, 2004, p. 39). Thus, women's liberation from family labor was caused by the intention to encourage women to work, rather than relax.

Taking into account commercial principles of the new economic policy, the organization of leisure required not only time (most women lacking it), but money. Upon finishing the Civil War, jobs taken temporarily by women were returned to men. Firings, divorces (the procedure was significantly simplified), subsequent financial and household problems, necessity to care for children ran a woman into trouble. Suffering financial constraints, a woman sometimes had to become a prostitute (McKinney, 2004, p. 42). Within the decade, in spite of declaring wage equality by the state, women's labor was mostly unskilled and low-paid. By 1925, about a half of all industrial male workers had been involved in the unskilled labor, among women the number amounted to 13% (Goldman, 2010, p. 25). Having analyzed the situation in the railway industry, W. Goldman confirmed that ‘if there is a choice whom to sack from the occupied position, male or female, it was a woman who was fired’, especially if she was married (Goldman, 2010, p. 12). The anti-woman policy of trade unions was emphasized by Sh. Fitzpatrick 9 (Fitzpatrick, 1990, p. 21). Referring to the textile industry, D. Pretty remarked that “since union membership was almost mandatory, it reflected the gender divisions in the industry; however, membership on factory committees was overwhelmingly male» (Pretty, 2004, p. 42).

A double load was placed upon married women with children; these women worked at the factory and did household chores (Smith, 1994, p. 143). It is a paradox, but criticizing working women burdened with household responsibilities in capitalist countries, Bolsheviki only talked about the decision to solve this problem. They believed that socialism could solve a dilemma through creating mechanisms of public support. Therefore, family and state would die. Consequently, that would lead to the policy which aimed to create favorable conditions for emancipation of women – no wage differentiation, wage increase, organizing necessary social and household conditions. However, in 1923-1924 men, who work in Moscow, spent 60.1 hours per month on their self-education (reading, lectures, museums, variety of clubs; when it comes to working women, this number amounted to 9.7 (Strumilin, 1982, p. 198). Besides, as “The Worker's Paper” (Rabochaya Gazeta, 1928) stated, there were not enough places in nurseries for children of working women: on average, at factories of the textile industry, which is the most “female”

industry with 70% women's workers) one "nursery place" was allocated to 80-120 women (Shorthand minutes..., sheets 51, 90).

Before the Revolution women's workers, in the opinion of Bolsheviks, had been the least conscious and organized part of the proletariat, they had to rise up to the men's level (Bobroff, 1974, p. 541). Yet the life in a big city, employment and some financial independence contributed to the fact that the role of women in the society was reviewed (Smith, 1994, p. 143). The Bolshevik policy categorized women by their political consciousness. Primarily, women's groups that had to be targeted in terms of the political impact were "proletarian women", who were factory workers or wives of workers, politically conscious peasants, including wives of poor peasants, farm hands, better peasants of medium welfare (Zdravomyslova, Temkina, 2003, pp. 445-446).

Nevertheless, the Soviet government did not appreciate housewives, though the latter were considered as inseparable from their husbands. For instance, in his article M.A. Feldman quoted the report of Chusov town's Work Committee of the Worker's Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (1924): "Everyday life of our active party member has become totally different from the one of a common worker. The former does not find his family as a priority, the latter finds his family as the center of main interests and aspirations, as something through which he observes the world. <...> Family is a distorting mirror of the society, where wife is often a home counter-revolutionary". Though "counter-revolutionarism" of female workers manifested itself as their dissatisfaction with low wage, queues in cooperative stores, social inequality (Feldman, 2006, pp. 60-61).

Generally, during NEP years (the New Economic Policy), administration of enterprises and trade unions tried to impose restrictions on the access of women to the industry, as it led to the emergence of additional problems – an increase in enterprises' social expenses and overheads, inadequate qualification of most women's workers (e.g. in 1926, according to 12 trade unions, only 4.1% of female workers had a medium qualification category) (Okorochkova, 1999, p. 95), limited possibilities to intensify women's labor. Therefore, factory and plant administrators tried to replace women's workers, although they were more diligent, disciplined, resistant to alcohol abuse and "misbehavior".

In 1927, women's wage averaged about 64% of men's wage. With equal qualifications, women were paid 73-77% of men's wage in metallurgy, in shoe-making industry – 67%, in tobacco industry – 85% (Goldman, 2010, p. 26). In the late 1920s, the production industry was flooded with former peasants, who brought in a patriarchal conservative attitude to a woman at factories ("Women should stay in the kitchen where they belong"). A lot of men believed that women do not need a high wage, it would spoil them. A vast majority of husbands could not stand their wives earning more than them. The government admitted the problem, forcing the press to write about success in solving it: in 1924, worker's correspondents (rabkorki) reported that the situation was improving especially among metallurgists and leather workers (If we work equally..., 1924).

The Revolution did not solve a problem of sexual harassment of women in the workplace, when women were often harassed by their superiors. This type of harassment was mostly of a horizontal kind: worker – supervisor, secretary – director. Harassment "remuneration" was diverse –career promotion, protection against dismissal, gifts. Working girls were also harassed in factory dormitories. In his collection of stories "People from the factory yard" (1928), a writer and a correspondent of the newspaper

“Komsomolskaya pravda”, Y. Ilyin, who was of the same age as his characters, described the everyday life of working youngsters from Krasnoholmsk Worsted Factory, one of the largest textile factories in the country. One of the stories shows the life of a female worker. Her life is not only hard, exhausting and low-paid work, but constant despising stares of supervisors, necessity to be on alert, to resist sexual harassment both at work and at leisure, an ability to establish correct relationships and keep the balance between being not “too loose” and criticized by peers, and being alienated and aloof.

An important component of the new leisure policy was the fight against deviant leisure forms. They were to be unacceptable for a real Bolshevik: “Pursuing scientific and technological knowledge, a true socialist was supposed to oppose ignorance, illiteracy, greed, apathy, religion, drug addiction, and alcoholism” (Haan, 1999, p. 431). New moral values put forward by Soviet ideologists also criticized worthless leisure – “Useless walks, ambiguous chats, empty flirt” (Kagan, 1930, pp. 39-30). “Immaturity” of women manifested itself in practices which after the Revolution became considered as deviant. First of all, it is religiousness. Consequently, it resulted into the intense antireligious propaganda. The Soviet power could not ignore the fact that there were most women workers who protested against expropriating church values (Ryan, 2013, pp. 1815-1816). Religious practices as a form of the deviant leisure resulted from the struggle with the dominant ideology, unwillingness to adopt tight social scenarios (Williams, 2009, p. 210). These were the very reasons why religious practices were dangerous for the totalitarian power eager to keep all life spheres under control. According to R.A. Stebbins, aberrations in religion (everything was referred to aberrations by the Soviet power, except for atheism) include the “serious deviant leisure”, which affects personality, global outlook and the system of values, opposing the “casual deviant leisure”, which implies recreational activities that do not change the lifestyle and have entertaining goals (Stebbins, 1997, p. 22).

S.G. Strumilin stated in his research that going to church was mainly women’s entertainment. He emphasized the fact that “the highest percentage of people going to church <...> amounted to the least literate members of working families – housewives” (Strumilin, 1982, p. 189). The press was inundated with antireligious articles targeted at women readers. The brightest were the materials of female worker correspondents (*rabkorki*), who admitted that they felt as if they had woken up after the ideological dream and had got rid of ideological prejudices. For instance, a *rabkorka*, nicknamed “Wised-up worker”, in her article “From the old life to the new one. Rip the religious trappings!” told:

Comrade workers! Wake up and eliminate the prejudices of the dim and distant past! Rip the veil from your eyes; tear out the memories of all fake saints... Go to clubs! Join some interest groups! Remove the religious blindfold – it will fall off like a scab when your wound heals” (Rabkorka Wised-up worker, 1924).

Her co-worker, nicknamed “Atheist”, criticizes female workers who follow traditions to light up vigil lamps before icons in factory shops. (Rabkorka Atheist, 3).

Instead of a christening ceremony, the government tried to popularize the so-called “October ceremony” (*oktyabryny*), when babies were given revolutionary names, rather than Christian ones: “The tramway depot has recently seen the first revolutionary “October ceremony” for a baby-son of a non-partisan worker Eugenia Sashnina. The boy was named REP (revolution, electrification, peace). The

“October ceremony” was good and solemn. Workers of the tramway depot, follow the example of com. Sashnina” (Rabkorka Labayeva, 1924).

In order to fight with workers’ religiousness, the Soviet propaganda used a popular technique – satirizing religious traditions, e.g. Great Lent was interpreted as old-fashioned and economically reasoned – early spring, diminishing stocks - it led to fasting. Besides, Orthodox Lent was compared to traditions of savages from New Guinea or the Polynesian islands (G.L., 1924). In addition, criticism concerned “greedy” priests, using pagan prejudices and favoring social inequality: “Intimidating everybody who disobeys them with the wrath of God and the hellfire, priests managed to persuade believers to observe Lent. For a wealthy person, priest or monk, fasting was not hard. If he could not eat meat, he could eat fish or caviar, fruit and vegetables. However, a poor person is different. He fasts eating only radish with kvass (rye-fermented beverage) or cabbage. Fasting makes such a person so weak that he can hardly move! In villages, Lent was so severely observed that even babies and ill people were not given milk or eggs, only Lenten diet. “Let him die, rather than break a fast”, - says a religious mother. Actually, many children or weakened people did not survive the Lenten season (G.L., 1924).

Another widespread women’s “deviation” was *meshchanstvo*, or bourgeois consumerism. Propaganda showed how threatening and harmful could be a desire to buy a smart skirt, accessories or to dance. Thus, the “Rabkor paper” published a poem devoted to a woman worker who became a lover of an elderly man – Soviet bourgeois (NEPman), and as a result she falls ill with syphilis (Rabkor paper..., 1925). Obviously, the Soviet power was concerned about the influence of working women’s leisure on productivity. Productivity could decrease due to such “bourgeois conventions” as night entertainment – dances, parties etc.: “Both girls rush home to curl hair, powder the face – later run to dance. The atmosphere there is loud, deafening, hustling and bustling till dawn. After dance the girls, tired and exhausted, rush to work. How productive is such a worker? She can hardly move”. (Kapysh, 1925).

Another excellent example of gender separation of deviant leisure in a family is presented in the paper article – a wife is taking her husband to church, but he makes up an excuse to escape from work and to go to drink alcohol with friends. The result is the following: the angry mother is smacking hungry children, her drunk husband’s only response to her telling-off is “Shut up!” (Rabkor of the plant..., 1924).

Gradual rejection of *meshchanstvo*, and later rejection of the established moral norms could lead to negative consequences. The period of the 1920s is commonly associated with sexual freedom of Soviet women, which sometimes results into tragedy. The emancipating activity of the government led to emergence of vulgar forms of feminism, especially among “promoted” (workers promoted to a senior position). Perhaps, a significant rise in a number of abortions is caused by social activation of women in the second part of the 1920s. Temporary feminization of the society with some smoothing custodial forms of power-subordination led to accumulation of hysterical elements in it (Yakovlev, 2002, p. 268). One of the most popular books at that period was the tale of S. Maklashkin “Moon on the right, or unusual love”, devoted to the tragic fate of the Komsomol member, Tatyana Aristarkhova. Orgiastic parties with Komsomol members who declare freedom of love, drugs and alcohol, unintended pregnancy – all these forced her to commit suicide: “Today all female Komsomol members smoke, spit over the knee like men, cut their hair, curse and even walk in a masculine style” (Maklashkin, 1990, 485).

These stories echo reality. For instance, in his memoirs the famous orientalist I.M. Dyakonov describes a tragic story of Mauli Vitte: “Mauli’s mother was a communist, Mauli was a Komsomol member; Komsomol moral values are stated in the novel of then famous Bogdanov “First girl”. Young Komsomol partisans rejected love and marriage; Lenin’s views published after his death by Krupskaya and Klara Zetkin have not been launched into the Komsomol environment yet; it was common to consider sex as a friendly service. Mauli shared this opinion, which resulted into numerous abortions, nervous breakdowns, suicide attempts, melancholic indifference to everything” (Dyakonov, 1995, p. 180).

The label *meshchanstvo* could imply a natural aspiration of a woman for a good standard of living. Attention to clothes can be caused by numerous problems on the way to buy a usual item of clothes or cosmetics, rather than the standards of the consumer society. Doctor A.G. Kagan, who studied the everyday life of youngsters exemplified the talks with young women workers. The talks were aimed at irrational wage spending - “a lot of money is spent on expensive dresses, silk stockings etc.”. Answering the question “Why?”, the girls said, “It’s simple. If I go to the party wearing a plain wool dress, I will stay alone for the whole evening” (Kagan, 1930, p. 183). Silk stockings became a symbol of the girls’ aspirations, criticized by the government, to be gorgeous as in the eyes of men, as in their own eyes. This was also noticed by foreigners. Eleni Samios-Kazantzaki travelled around Russia in 1928 and wrote a story “Silk stockings”. She narrated how flourishing was their stocking smuggle on the Batumi market. Nevertheless, wearing such clothes could lead to the exclusion from the Party, however, “if necessary, women would sell out USSR for a pair of silk stockings” (Cit.: Legenkova, 2015, p. 115).

Primitive and deviant leisure forms prevailed for the reason of disorderly life, which forced women workers to raise questions at different meetings. Thus, at the 3d All-union Session of Rabkors in 1926, a worker correspondent Nefedova said, “Our woman worker should be taught to cook shchi, to remove lice, to chop meat. Our woman worker should be taught to feed a baby, to do the washing. <...> Comrades, it is necessary to write how to cook egg biscuit for a husband. We cannot do it. It is said there is beef-Stroganoff, but we cannot cook it either. If somebody writes it, when the co-worker comes to see me, I will show off my beef-Stroganoff. <...> We are struggling for the good: underwear and skirt. And let me on occasion put on yellow shoes” (3d All-union Session..., 1926, p. 158). Here it is possible to see two issues: first – aspirations to experience the new everyday life; second – aspirations to regulate the everyday life.

A conventional male deviation, alcohol-addiction, was not common for women. Unlike Great Britain (Fenton, 2017, pp. 308-310), in the 1920s, women were not allowed into pubs and bars, but expensive restaurants were unaffordable for workers. Additionally, the press sometimes described mixed binge-drinking companies. Women’s alcohol addiction was considered as the destiny of marginal women – thieves and prostitutes.

Instead of “deviations”, like in the male leisure, the Soviet female workers were advised to do sports. The image of the sportswoman was typical not only for the Soviet society of the 1920-1930s, but for the Western as well. The Soviet feature was propaganda of sports for both physical fit of women and preventing from deviant practices, whereas promoters of women’s sports in the West often presented sports as emancipation on the way to equality. Sports were perceived as bringing women to typically male forms of leisure. It is illustrated by the article of doctor I. Volpert “Woman worker – for physical

training!” from the magazine “Women worker and peasant”, issue 10, 1924: “Do women need physical training? They need it like men (Volpert, 1924, p. 15). Like the goal of sport propaganda among men, the goal of PE for women is nurturing healthy and physically fit people: “Female workers! For the sake of your health, enroll in proletarian sport clubs! Sunbathe, swim, row, sail! PE will make you strong, healthy and fit” (Volpert, 1924, p. 15). “Rowing girls” will be more enduring workers and reserve staff able to substitute men in case of war.

7. Conclusion

In everyday realities of a Soviet city in the 1920s, women were restricted in their opportunities to realize themselves in leisure. In the conditions of lower wage and the necessity to do household chores, women had no time and money for leisure. Besides, the patriarchal values and attitudes prevailed in the society making women dependent on men in the family and in the workplace and requiring women to follow conventional gender roles. Most traditional leisure activities – dances, walks, going to church, buying clothes and cosmetics – were positioned as deviant, which, in the opinion of the Soviet power, was an obstacle to nurture a real Soviet worker. The power encouraged women to take up male leisure activities ignoring their female needs. The Bolshevik slogan of women liberation was mainly of a declarative type. Actually, the government tried to regulate quite severely emancipation of Soviet women, who had to keep the balance between conventional patriarchal values, revolutionary ideas and everyday routine, which, in theory, granted the right to leisure, but gave no time, no money, no freedom in reality.

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