

# GENDER RELATIONS IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE: POST-SOVIET TRANSFORMATIONS OF FAMILY AND INTIMACY (INTRODUCTION)

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Studies of the private sphere are a well-established tradition within gender studies. In fact, long before gender studies became institutionalized as a scholarly discipline, the principal and often the only social arena where gender relations were “visible” was the family, one of the classic foci of sociology. However, traditional sociology of the family, including in the Soviet Union, tended to examine this institution from strictly functional viewpoints, guided by a social climate that presumed the “healthy family” to be the basis of a “healthy society.” Hence it was primarily those aspects of the lives of families that were significant from the standpoint of the state—reproductive prospects, divorce, forms of marital relations, child rearing—that were subject to study. Of course all this research was overloaded with value judgments, and the properly sociological focus of analysis was often overshadowed by social problems (Matskovskii 1989). Other, extra-familial practices remained practically invisible to Soviet sociology, with the exception of works by Igor Kon dealing with topics such as friendship and sexuality (Kon 1980; 1992). Many post-Soviet texts on the sociology of the family fall squarely into this tradition (for example, Antonov and Medkov 1996; Golod 1998).

However, on the whole, after the emergence and gradual institutionalization of gender studies in the post-Soviet countries in the 1990s, views of what constitutes private life were considerably expanded. According to the conception that has formed the basis for this thematic issue of *Laboratorium*, this realm includes a broad array of practices and strategies. We include in it the domain of intimacy and the formation of personal autonomy, whose logic is not wholly convertible into a logic of market relations. The significance of the private realm has grown in the globalized world: impacted by market consumerism and trends toward the individualization and pluralization of lifestyles, the private sphere has been shaped in opposition to the public sphere. In the post-Soviet countries,

the increase in the significance of the private has been refracted by the specific development of capitalism, which assumes the demarcation of the private realm, conceived as a refuge from the dangers of the public sphere, and where new practices have combined with images inherited from the communist period. We assume that, analytically speaking, it is impossible to strictly separate the private sphere from the public sphere: the boundary between them is permeable and negotiable. Public institutions have an impact on what happens in private life.

The authors of this issue have examined changes in the gender hierarchies within private life under the impact of state family and demographic policies, the changing ideological context and the challenges of globalization, traditional and new agents of gender control and resistance to these agents, and transformations in the way families are organized.

It would be wrong to assume that the character and even the direction of these transformations have been uniform in all the post-Soviet countries. Some of them, like the Baltic countries, became integrated with wider Europe, and gender policy there has been more or less steadily moved closer to the standards of the European Union. In other countries (for example, in Central Asia), the emergence of nation-states has been accompanied by a certain archaization of gender relations. At the same time, the Soviet past has for the time being continued to exercise a significant impact on the gender identities of all "former Soviet people," even those who migrated out of the former Soviet Union (Tartakovskaia 2006). In general, internal and external migration have been so intensive in the post-Soviet countries that, with reference to the study of the private sphere and identities, it would be more appropriate to speak not of "post-Soviet space," but of a "post-Soviet culture," which, albeit volatile, still has palpable common roots.

In the past decade, gender studies have focused less on the private realm and more often on other topics connected with the transformation of the public sphere, such as gender asymmetry in the labor market (Tartakovskaia 2004; Khotkina 2001), the feminization of poverty (Baskakova 2004), the problems of women's involvement in politics (Aivazova 2007), migration (Tiuriukanova 2002), new forms of employment and female entrepreneurship (Mezentseva 2002; Chirikova 2001), and gender representations in advertising and the media (Usmanova 2000; Iurchak 2000). There have also been works that attempt an all-round analysis of the gender regime in individual post-Soviet countries (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2007; Kasymova 2007; Zhurzhenko 2008). This emphasis is understandable, since the principal, most dramatic alterations in the gender regime have occurred in concert with transformations of the economic, political, and cultural landscape in the area that twenty years ago was known as the Soviet state. The processes that have unfolded in the private realm have mainly been a continuation of trends already established in the late Soviet period (Temkina 2008; Rotkirch 2002).

However, dynamic transformations in income distribution, social policy, ideology, and the realm of values and norms have led to significant qualitative

changes in the post-Soviet private sphere. Unfortunately, in recent years the field of gender studies has shrunk; this is largely due the departure of many foundations that had supported research in this area (Popkova and Tartakovskaia 2010) as well as to the overall “poverty of sociology” (Sokolov 2009), but also to a kind of ghettoization, that is, the cliquishness of the gender studies community itself, which has not been conducive to the formation of schools of thought and disciplinary continuity (Barchunova 2002). Whatever the case may be, sociological thought at present has drastically fallen behind transformations in real life and even the media coverage of these transformations, which has generated a substantial number of new stereotypes and moral panics—for example, concerning the massive spread of voluntary childlessness, homosexuality, and the total commercialization not only of female sexuality, but of masculine sexuality as well.

The only exception has been the continuous program of research projects and publications produced by the European University in Saint Petersburg, which has issued a whole series of books that are vital for understanding the contemporary transformations of the private sphere (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002; Temkina 2008; Zdravomyslova, Temkina, and Rotkirch 2009; Zdravomyslova, Pasyukova, Temkina, and Tkach 2010).

This issue of *Laboratorium* has been conceived as an attempt to fill this gap, at least in part. The texts we have assembled here are methodologically and thematically heterogeneous, but they are united by a desire to capture the new phenomena and shifts within private life that are most important and most characteristic of post-communist societies.

Thus, in their article, Zhanna Chernova and Larisa Shpakovskaya describe the strategies used by “young adults” to organize their private lives. These strategies are compared with discursive prescriptions and state regulatory practices, which are meant not only (and not so much) to improve the demographic situation, but also to produce forms of domestic unions that are acceptable to the state. This aspect of the study of state social and gender policy is quite relevant insofar as this policy is taking shape before our very eyes, setting new overt and implicit priorities. However, researchers have hitherto mainly focused on the administrative neologism “maternal capital” and the consequences of its implementation for the reproductive projects of Russian families (see, for example, Isupova and Kosterina 2010), while ignoring all other practices meant to impact young families. Chernova and Shpakovskaya not only examine in detail the political measures used to shape the notion of a “happy” young family, but also compare them with the real practices of young people who organize their life scenarios around the search for a balance between freedom, attachments, professional self-realization, and parenthood. Chernova and Shpakovskaya also pose the important question of whether the concept of the “second demographic transition” is applicable to contemporary Russia (Vishnevskii 2006).

The topic of the everyday practices employed by young families is continued by Yulia Gradskova in an article that deals with the interaction between parents

and preschool educational institutions. The enormous shortage of kindergartens in the country is a problem recognized in Russian society, but Gradskova approaches this problem from an unexpected angle. Using as her empirical base a study of online discussions mainly involving young mothers exploring the possibility of placing their children in kindergartens, Gradskova examines these discussions from the viewpoint of the discursive construction of Russian motherhood. To what extent is sending a child to kindergarten a forced measure? To what extent is it preferable? Does the mother of a kindergartener feel like a full-fledged mother, or is she wrecked by feelings of guilt? On the basis of a close analysis not only of the content but also the language of cyber-texts on this topic, Gradskova concludes that notions about the “normalcy” of kindergarten are incorporated into the structure of contemporary parenting. Although there is a certain tension between the construction of femininity and the rational organization of their own roles as mothers, young mothers are willing to deal with these institutions and to fight to improve their quality.

The gender aspects of child rearing are also the subject of Claudia Zbenovich’s paper. Her research focuses on Russian-speaking immigrant families in Israel—a segment of post-Soviet culture (if not post-Soviet space) that is rarely mentioned in this context. Her article presents not a sociological but a sociolinguistic analysis of the formation of gender identity among bilingual children who speak Russian and Hebrew. This topic is rarely treated within gender studies. Zbenovich shows how the gender markers of language and culture as a whole are interwoven with socialization practices, generating a complex configuration of ethnic, gender, and class factors that influence the formation of the range of acceptable behavior for girls and boys.

The daily lives of female immigrants are the focus of a study by Olga Brednikova and Olga Tkach. The phenomenon of female migration in general has attracted the attention of researchers, but it is usually examined from the viewpoint of global economic factors and the realities of local labor markets (see, for example, Khushkadamova 2010). On the contrary, the focus of Brednikova and Tkach’s research is the organization of private life by these migrants, in particular, their conception of “home,” traditionally viewed as an important arena of self-fulfillment for women. What does the private space of “home” mean for female migrants, who by definition are from their own home? To what degree do they feel “at home” in their host country? What strategies do they employ to “domesticate” this alien environment? Do they intend to return home? Do they miss their “real” homes? Brednikova and Tkach show how flexible and active these women are in organizing new forms of privacy and sociality, redefining customary relationships with “alien” and “familiar” space. Their research enables Brednikova and Tkach to conclude that the female migrants represent a nomadic subjectivity that overcomes the forms of stability characteristic of modern society.

Two articles in this issue deal with modernization processes in traditional societies which, although they undoubtedly experienced the impact of Soviet gender policy, have to a great extent preserved their patriarchal specificity. In

the article by Tatyana Lytkina, readers are presented with a detailed ethnographic description of the gender regime in a small Dagestani mountain village. Her thick description of everyday realities and social relations in this particular village gives us an insight into the unequal reach of the Soviet modernization project, showing how little it affected the empire's ethnic margins, even within the Russian Federation. Lytkina examines the evolution of gender relations by studying three generations of women within a single family. Her method reveals both the stability of the patriarchal gender matrix and its gradual erosion as the village is slowly integrated into market relations and the global communications system.

Sofia Kasymova's paper deals with a specific matrimonial strategy practiced by educated women in Tajikistan—namely, marriages to foreigners. The article continues research into the highly interesting subject of the system of preferences in choosing a spouse, a system that is shaped at the intersection of traditional regulations, the new values introduced by the market economy, and the individualization of the candidates themselves. Several years ago, Gul'nara Ibraeva did very interesting research on the marriage market in Bishkek (Ibraeva 2006). Kasymova continues this theme, with the difference that she also traces the aftermaths of these cross-cultural marriages. She concludes that they are unstable and that fairly strict gender hierarchies are established within such marriages, although Tajik women to a great extent marry European men precisely in order to escape such hierarchies.

The article by Tatyana Barchunova and Oksana Parfenova deals with the phenomenon of "free-floating sexuality," as exemplified by young women involved in homosexual relationships. Barchunova and Parfenova contrast this with the concept of "plastic sexuality" proposed by Anthony Giddens (1992), a term that emphasizes the subject's intentionality, his or her arbitrary choice. Barchunova and Parfenova, on the contrary, draw attention "not only to the aspect of the variability and fluidity of experience, but also to certain barriers and boundaries within intimate behavior, external circumstances that limit free manifestations of desire." The authors thus make an important contribution to contemporary theories of sexuality, considerably revising the postmodernist interpretation of sexuality as an unstable essence unlimited by anything other than desire itself.

This issue of *Laboratorium* thus contains no more than a number of case studies, but ones that suggest new approaches to vital themes in gender sociology—privacy, sexuality, the motivations for and ways of "inhabiting" marriage, and the tensions between traditionalism and market-driven aspirations, between patriarchy and egalitarian practices. We hope that these articles will inspire a broader discussion.

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