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Development in the Soviet Union
Susan Bridger
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Introduction

WOMEN AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Over the last quarter of a century, issues of development have been consistently brought to world attention, not least by the United Nations' Development Decades. The prime aim of these Decades has been to increase the rate of economic growth of the world's developing countries. This has been accompanied, since 1970, by a greater emphasis on aid from the richer countries to the developing world.

During this period, annual growth rates have indeed accelerated in developing countries. At the same time, however, they have ceased to be self-sufficient in food. As the production of cash crops for export and the development of urban-based industry has become ever more widespread, the production of basic foodstuffs to meet local needs has declined. By the end of the second Decade, 10% of the Third World's total consumption of food grains was imported. In many countries of Africa, Asia and South America the poor now form a greater proportion of the population than they did at the beginning of the sixties.¹

As the local effects of this pattern of development started to emerge by the beginning of the second Development Decade, women researchers began to point out the particularly distressing consequences for Third World women. Women form the majority of the world's food producers – 60% to 80% of agricultural workers in Africa and Asia² – yet their huge contribution, these writers observed, was consistently ignored by development planners. Ester Boserup in her pioneering book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, demonstrated that, far from directing development programmes towards the women with prime responsibility for food production, planners directed agricultural improvement projects almost entirely towards men.

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Development planners and government officials alike concentrated on commercial agriculture and the production of cash crops for export using predominantly male wage-labour. The subsistence farming engaged in by women, which fed the rural population, was neglected by development programmes.³

The result has often been to make rural women worse off than they were before the development process began. With the emphasis on cash-cropping, commercial cultivation has tended to monopolise the best land. In consequence, women have often been obliged to work smaller plots with poorer soil than before. Where men have been drawn into commercial agriculture, they are less likely to help with subsistence farming in tasks such as clearing land. Women's work may therefore become both harder and less productive. At the same time, men's involvement in commercial agriculture does not automatically confer material benefits on their families. Research has shown not only that agricultural wage rates are often low but also that men may choose to spend their cash income on consumer goods and alcohol. This, together with declining productivity in subsistence farming, may actually cause the nutritional levels within the family to fall.⁴

When agricultural improvement projects and, especially, technology are introduced into rural areas they have often been found to depress rather than enhance female status. Women are rarely given training in the new skills which technological change demands. When mechanisation is introduced to undertake tasks which women previously performed as wage-labourers, they are deprived of an important source of income: 'observers of the development scene are increasingly concerned that where technology frees women from time-consuming, arduous or unproductive tasks there are no viable alternative forms of productive work for them'.⁵ The advent of technology, therefore, may contribute to the marginalisation and impoverishment of rural women. Certainly, where women are not recruited into mechanised work, the waged manual labour which remains open to them is likely to have an increasingly diminished status. The tiring and monotonous work which women perform in subsistence farming and domestic labour has not been significantly lightened by new technologies.⁶

Rural women's enormous, unwaged contribution to food production, domestic labour and child care has remained largely unrecognised or undervalued both by their own communities and by development planners. Despite the Development Decades, Zubeida

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Ahmad of the International Labour Office, writing in 1980, was still able to describe the majority of rural women in developing countries in the following words:

It has been estimated that rural women's actual daily working hours can be as high as fifteen to sixteen, often considerably more than those of men. They suffer from a double burden of exploitation: along with their menfolk, as part of the rural poor; and, in addition, as members of the female sex. In many parts of the world, from the time they are born, rural women are given a minimum of medical care, less than their fair share of the family's food and an inferior education . . . and have to put up with poor working conditions, including lower wages, for tasks involving hard, physical labour. Finally, women are seldom considered in the planning of rural development projects, with the consequence that modernisation has often had a negative impact on women.⁷

Since the early 1970s, a solution to this state of affairs favoured and promoted by women writers on development issues has been the 'integration of women into development'. The view has become current that if women's needs and interests are taken into account during the process of development, benefits will accrue not only to women as individuals but also to their communities and countries: 'women must be integrated into the process of rural development not only because simple justice demands that it be done, but also because excluding women means under-utilising a high potential resource, and this can eventually have adverse effects on the economic growth rate'.⁸

As a result, governments and agencies which have come to recognise the neglect of women by development planners have added special women's schemes to existing development programmes. Income-generating projects have been set up for women in handicrafts and rural industries as well as in the sphere of agriculture, and women have been recruited into development agencies.

Initiatives of this kind, especially income-generating projects, have, however, been criticised by some writers on women and development for what is seen as their failure to recognise women's key role in the rural economy. By emphasising the generation of cash income, it is argued, the undervaluing of unwaged agricultural work, and especially of domestic labour, is merely reinforced. As Hanna Papanek, writing on development planning in 1977, observed:

A curious ambiguity in the concept of integrating women in the development process hampers the achievement of this goal from the start. For women *are* full participants in all processes of social change, in spite of the fact that they may be affected differently than men. However, these differences often serve to confirm the notion that women are less central to major social processes than

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men. In turn, this misperception leads many to assume that women are a backward sector of society that need to be 'integrated' in order to be 'modernised'. This false and patronising view is not a good basis for development policies. At the same time, women have, of course, been excluded from the development process in a political and technical sense. They have not participated in the decisions that affect both sexes. Where women must be integrated in development is development planning – the process by which many governments seek to advance the growth and distribution of available resources.⁹

Other feminist writers have taken this argument a stage further. The problem is not simply that policy-makers fail to recognise the current productivity of rural women, or that drawing women into the market economy through home industries may lead to greater exploitation. Nor would the solution simply be greater female involvement in planning, they maintain. The question untouched by much of the literature is seen as far more fundamental and concerns the nature of the development process itself. These writers question whether women really have a great deal to gain from a model of development which involves integrating developing countries into the international market system:

The solution cannot lie in simply 'extending the benefits of modernisation' to women. Modernisation does not benefit the majority of men either, when it is tied to an economic system in which certain countries of the world exploit others, and certain classes within a country profit from the exploitation of both men and women. To be of benefit to women, modernisation would have to be adapted to the needs of women for both production and reproduction, not women to the needs of modernisation, as is usually the case.¹⁰

There is little evidence, it is argued, that the development of national economies of itself improves the position of women. As women in the developed world predominate in low-skilled, low-paid work, carry the burden of domestic labour and child care and have a subordinate role in their societies, 'this is not a model of development, or of the integration of women into development, that one would care to commend to other countries'.¹¹

Genuine development which embraces concepts of equity and justice cannot, in the view of such writers, take place as long as half the world's population is overburdened with work which is undervalued and viewed as marginal to economic development. As Anita Anand has pointed out:

Even to this day, the most ardent proponents of integrating women into development have not realised that neither mainstream nor Marxist models

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have room for women, as neither group has addressed the problem of patriarchy. Society's acceptance of male domination has pervaded development work. Though much lip service has been paid to the equal participation of women in the male-dominated development circles, this has remained by and large 'integration' without much thought or attempt towards genuine power sharing with women.¹²

As this comment suggests, feminist writers who are critical of the capitalist model of development do not necessarily regard a socialist alternative as desirable for women. The governments of developing countries which espouse socialist doctrine do, however, declare a formal commitment to the principle of sexual equality. Their policies are based largely on the orthodox communist position on women as it was developed by the Communist International after 1917 from the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin.¹³ Developing countries which are closely linked and in varying degrees dependent on the USSR are, however, subject to its influence not simply on the issue of women's emancipation. In their development strategies too, these countries are likely to follow the lead of the USSR. Through their work in the rural economy, women have made an enormous contribution to the modernisation of the Soviet Union. It is the intention of this study to analyse whether the Soviet model of development has been able to promote sexual equality and to avoid the marginalisation of rural women which continues to beset developing countries under capitalism.

RURAL WOMEN IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE USSR

As the largest political unit in the world, the Soviet Union covers approximately one sixth of the land surface of the earth. Three-quarters of the USSR lies north of the 50th parallel. This fact, coupled with the predominantly low-lying nature of the country and the great distance of most of its territory from the sea, means that the majority of the Soviet Union is characterised by great extremes of temperature and low rainfall. As a result of both climatic conditions and the predominance of poor quality soils, much of the USSR is highly unfavourable for agriculture. The majority of the areas in which agriculture is concentrated have a short growing season and, hence, acutely seasonal patterns of employment for the rural workforce.

In 1913, the total population of the Russian Empire numbered some 166 million: just under 10% lived in Turkestan and Transcaucasia

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whilst a further 8% lived in Siberia and provinces which now form part of Kazakhstan.¹⁴ In 1917 the Bolsheviks came to power in a land with an extremely complex ethnic composition. At late as 1970 the Soviet census listed no fewer than 104 national groups resident in the USSR. In addition to their linguistic, cultural and religious differences, the varying historical backgrounds of these nationalities presented the revolutionary government with a population displaying differing, and in many cases pre-capitalist, stages of development. The Russian Empire was an overwhelmingly peasant land. In 1913, 81% of the population lived in rural areas, whilst industry employed a total of less than four million people.¹⁵

Peasant women in Imperial Russia

In nineteenth-century Russia both rural landowners and peasant communes, the governing institutions of the village, recognised the peasant family as an indivisible unit. Male authority within the family was enshrined in both custom and law which vested in the head of the household almost all property rights and control over inheritance. Tradition continually reinforced women's subordination. 'A crab is not a fish – a woman is not a person', ran the proverb which succinctly summarised peasant attitudes.

Most peasant families adhered to a strict division of labour between the sexes. As a general rule, women had sole charge of the production of vegetables and the care of poultry and dairy cows. The division of labour characteristic of Belorussia in the 1890s is illustrative of the way in which fieldwork was apportioned throughout the year. In this region, men took charge of ploughing, sowing, harrowing, the mowing and carting of hay, threshing in autumn and the care of cattle in winter. The women would till, sow and weed the vegetable garden and also weed flax and potatoes. Later in the year they would pull flax, gather hemp, lift potatoes and harvest grain. In large families this pattern of work would be rigidly adhered to, yet in smaller families where labour was insufficient it was 'not unusual to meet a girl who could mow, thresh and plough really well'.¹⁶

The agricultural work which women performed was undertaken in addition to their responsibilities in the home. Women alone cooked the family's food, fetched all the water, sewed and washed clothes and converted the fruits of the family's land into cloth and food products. The major domestic responsibility of the men was chopping wood for

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use as fuel. During the winter months when fieldwork was impossible, women were regularly involved in the domestic production of articles for sale, particularly textiles.

Contemporary observers of the extended peasant family invariably described it as hierarchical, patriarchal and authoritarian. Peasant marriages were usually arranged. As a newcomer to her husband's family, a bride came under the authority of the older women as well as the men. Regular pregnancies were considered an inevitable consequence of marriage and high rates of infant mortality and miscarriage, rather than contraception or abortion, limited family size. Legal divorce was costly and rare amongst the peasantry. Separations, sanctioned by local peasant courts, were more common, though the economic consequences for women without land rights were enough to dissuade most women from taking such a step: 'It is bad with a husband, twice as bad without him', ran a saying current amongst women in the villages.¹⁷

Such public services as existed in pre-Revolutionary Russia were largely concentrated in the towns. Doctors were so few that villagers usually relied on traditional herbalists for treatment. Primary education was far from universal by the outbreak of the First World War and only one in eight women under the age of fifty could read.¹⁸ For most women in rural Russia, unwaged work in the home and on the family's land was the dominant feature of their lives.

Socialist theory on the woman question

Commitment to sexual equality became a declared policy of Russian Social Democrats in 1903, when, at the Second Congress of the Party, the programme was extended on Lenin's initiative to include demands for equality in education and in civil and political rights.¹⁹ Socialist theory on the woman question, on which these demands were based, had first been expounded by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto of 1848, and subsequently developed by the German Marxist, August Bebel, in his *Woman and Socialism* of 1879, and by Engels himself five years later in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. By 1917 further contributions to the debate had been made not only by European Marxists but also by Russian socialist women, notably Nadezhda Krupskaya in her pamphlet *The Woman Worker* of 1901 and Alexandra Kollontai in her 1909 *Social Bases of the Woman Question*.

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For all these writers the solution to the problem of sexual inequality lay in the abolition of capitalism. The phenomena of oppression and exploitation were seen as the essential superstructural reflection of the economic base of capitalist society. It was thus inevitable that in a society based on private property women would be oppressed. With the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialist production relationships, human relationships would be unbounded by economic necessity and all exploitation would cease. For Engels, the oppression suffered by women was a function of their exclusion from public production and their confinement to private production and reproduction within the family. Within the context of the bourgeois family, he argued, women were reduced to domestic slaves whilst their husbands held exclusive power conferred by their economically dominant position. 'In the family', he wrote, '[the husband] is the bourgeois, the wife represents the proletariat.'²⁰ Women's inferior status in society was thus a consequence of their dependence on men within the family. The family itself was seen as a social institution whose relationships were determined not by biology but by economics. Under capitalism the family was the repository of private property 'for the safeguarding and inheritance of which monogamy and male domination were established'.²¹

Under socialism, therefore, as the means of production passed into common ownership, women would gain equal access to economic, social and political activities, private housekeeping would be transformed into a social industry and child care would become a public affair. 'The emancipation of women', Engels stated, 'becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large, social scale, and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree.'²² As property was seen as the exclusive definer of personal relationships, then the absence of private property under socialism would result in a profound change in the quality of relationships between men and women. The domination of women by their husbands, Engels believed, would simply vanish as male economic predominance disappeared. With full economic equality, he argued, there would be no basis for marriage other than 'individual sex love' which, being by nature exclusive, would result in a new and higher form of monogamy. Under socialism, 'monogamy, instead of declining, finally becomes a reality'.²³ This view of sexual relationships expounded by Engels formed the basis of Russian Marxist thought on the question. Yet only Alexandra Kollontai in her much criticised and

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misunderstood writings of the early twenties was to appreciate how complex were questions of personal relationships and to attempt a more sophisticated analysis of the relationship between love, sex and social change.²⁴

The Bolsheviks and the Russian peasantry

The 1917 Decree on Land provided for all land to 'be taken over without compensation and become the property of the whole people, to be used by those who cultivate it'.²⁵ For the Bolsheviks the Decree marked the first of many attempts to come to terms with the essential paradox of their position. Having seized power with the support of a sector of the relatively tiny urban working class, they were obliged to consolidate their gains in a predominantly peasant country. The troubled relationship between the Bolsheviks and the peasantry in the 1920s was characterised by alternating government attempts at appeasement and coercion.

Compulsory requisitioning of grain during the Civil War was replaced in 1921 by a system of progressive taxation under the New Economic Policy. The aim was to feed urban workers and develop industrial production. As the expected world socialist revolution failed to materialise, the Bolsheviks viewed industrial development as a matter of urgency. Instead of the hoped-for international support for socialist construction in Russia, the country faced economic and political isolation. In these circumstances, the capital needed for industrial development had to be found from domestic sources and, initially, this meant from the peasantry.

The period of national emergency during the Civil War caused both economic collapse and enormous social upheaval. In consequence, the Bolsheviks faced immense practical difficulties in attempting to implement Marxist policies on sexual equality. The reintroduction of market forces into the economy in 1921 had an adverse effect on female employment. At the same time, giving priority to industrial development severely limited social welfare programmes. The emancipation of women by the accepted Marxist route of their mass introduction into public production and the socialisation of domestic labour and child care therefore became the subject of much rhetoric but little action. Legislative change and political mobilisation became prime instruments in the revolutionary transformation of female roles and status attempted during the first decade of Soviet rule.

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Women were seen by the Bolsheviks as indispensable participants in the social revolution needed to produce the future socialist state. In transforming their own lives, it was believed, women would significantly weaken the influence of traditional authority and provide a means by which new cultural values might be established. The political mobilisation of rural women, therefore, had a twofold aim: to lay the foundation for female emancipation in the countryside and, secondly, but of no less importance, to give the Party a foothold in the hostile peasant world.

The impact of the Revolution 1917–29

In 1919 the Women's Department of the Central Committee Secretariat (Zhenotdel) was established as an official Party organ to direct systematic work amongst women. It founded a network of local women's departments staffed by Party members and volunteers. In order to draw women into public life, the Zhenotdel devised a system of 'delegate meetings' which operated in both town and country throughout the 1920s. Local women's organisers would arrange meetings of working or peasant women at which one of their number would be elected as a delegate (*delegatka*) to the Zhenotdel for between three and six months. The elected *delegatka* would then become an observer or trainee worker in a local Soviet, trade union, school or other public service body from which she would report back before ceding her place to one of her peers. Meetings of delegates were to be held twice a month to allow them to share their experiences and hear lectures on Soviet government, the position of women, hygiene or co-operatives.

Over a million peasant women became *delegatki* during the mid-1920s, yet they represented only a tiny minority of the rural female population. For most peasant women, the role of delegate was alien and demanding and its possible benefits were far from clear. Women who had been keen to become delegates would often give up the work on discovering that it conferred no special privileges. There was an understandable reluctance on the part of village women to add a further thankless task to their already overburdened lives. The lack of comprehension of rural life demonstrated by the leaders of this urban-inspired movement was criticised by rural sociologists of the time: 'It is essential to learn to respect the peasant women's time and consider her position in the family . . . Only then will we avoid such failures as when