Introduction

Around noon on a chilly day in early March – International Women's Day, 1996 – a group of women gathers in Moscow's Pushkin Square. They are there for a demonstration: Women in Black Against Violence. The women mill around, waiting for the protest march to begin; they plan to walk to the Nikitskie Gates, a few blocks away. More women trickle into the square in twos and threes. Soon, the group has expanded to about sixty. A few stand silently, dressed in black, holding a banner reading "Women in Black Against Violence." Two young women hold a large blue banner with white felt letters, spelling out a slogan strange and unfamiliar to Russian passersby: "There are no free men without free women. Amazons: Women Smashing Stereotypes!" The "O" letters are drawn as woman-symbols, a little cross beneath each one. Representatives of the "Sisters" Rape Crisis Center circulate, handing out business cards and leaflets advertising their services for victims of rape. One woman holds a poster decrying Soviet agitprop about International Women's Day. It is a three-frame cartoon. In the first frame, dated "March 7th," a man is shown threatening a woman with his fist. The second frame, "March 8th," shows him presenting her with a bouquet of flowers. The third frame, "March 9th," simply repeats the image from the first frame. In a similar vein, a middle-aged woman carries a poster reading, "We demand the adoption of a law against domestic violence." These posters are a bitter response to the government's failure to do anything to stem the widespread violence against women in Russia, where approximately 14,000 women are murdered each year by their husbands and partners. A kind-looking woman with gray hair holds a hand-lettered sign: "TV creates new rapist-Chikatilos" (Chikatilo was a serial killer, rapist, and cannibal). A television camera crew strolls around, filming the banners and posters; in an attempt to be an anonymous observer, I try to avoid them (and, as it turns out, I fail).

When it comes time to march, we move out of the square and tramp down the snowy sidewalk in a relatively cheery mood: the sun is shining.

Passersby seem curious; a group of policemen turns and stares as we march past. I snap a photo of them. They ignore me completely.

The march concludes at the Nikitskie Gates. We form a circle, and someone hands out candles. We light the candles and cup them in our hands, trying to shield them from the wind: always a struggle at outdoor candlelight vigils. I look around the circle and notice that about a third of us are foreigners.

One of the organizers calls for our attention, and declares a moment of silence for all the women who have been victims of violence: in the home, on the streets, in Chechnia. Everyone falls silent. After a time, women begin to step forward, one by one, and speak a few words each about how violence against women has entered their lives. Someone mentions the origins of International Women's Day; another speaker talks about reclaiming International Women's Day to remember those who have died at the hands of violence. Someone says that, between violence on the streets and violence in the home, there is no safe place for women. There is a respectful silence as each woman speaks, their words quiet against the noise of passing streetcars.

Suddenly, a middle-aged man who has been lurking nearby breaks his way into the circle. As though making us a toast, the man gestures and then holds forth: "I want to wish *all* you women a happy International Women's Day, and wish you happiness, and love, and . . ." I cringe, silently pleading with him to get lost, to let this group of women have this one, temporary space to express themselves. And then, without missing a beat, Laima Geidar, a young activist, one of the "Amazons," interrupts him. She shouts: "Don't wish us happiness! Wish us *equal rights*!!!" She raises her fist in the air, and cries, "Hurrah!!!" She continues: "Wish us *equal opportunities*!!! Hurrah!!! Full-fledged *citizenship*!!! Hurrah!!!" Within moments, the whole circle is cheering.

The man seems dazed, shocked, and then crestfallen. A tall, willowy woman takes him by the arm, says a few soft words, and leads him out of the circle. I feel sorry for him. In his experience, International Women's Day has been a holiday, a time for men to praise women for their achievements, thank them for their tireless hard work in the economy and in the home, bring home a bouquet of flowers, and maybe even do the dinner dishes for once. Times have apparently changed. The women in this unusual circle are saying that International Women's Day has been a terribly whitewashed holiday, and that they will no longer participate in the lie. The rest of the demonstration passes peacefully and without interference.

That night, snatches of the protest are shown on the evening news. For many viewers, it might appear a curiosity, a man-bites-dog sort of

story. Rather than the saccharine broadcasts shown on Women's Day in years past, this one portrays a group of women speaking out in public against oppression and discrimination in Russian society. Another piece of the truth has emerged from the Soviet skeleton closet. A new set of women's issues has come out into the public sphere.

April 17, 1995. Twelve women meet in the basement of a building not far from Moscow's renovated Tretiakov art gallery. They drink tea from mugs inscribed with their names – many worn to the point of illegibility. They snack on cookies and candies, and chat. After a time, they move into the next room, put on comfortable clothing, and engage in confidence lessons: vocalization, and a sort of posture-correcting aerobics. They are reclaiming their "femininity" in a post-totalitarian world – one whose ideology did its best to eliminate gender distinctions, while in reality it reinforced women's sense of inferiority in all areas of life: politics, society, the economy, the home. Welcome to Club Harmony (Klub Garmoniia), run by Mariia Arbatova, a dark-haired mother of twins, in her late thirties.

One newcomer explains that she is attending the club after having seen Arbatova on television. A playwright, Arbatova has taken on a new role, as the regular co-host of a television talk show called *I Myself* (*Ia Sama*). Each week, the show features a new female guest – for instance, a woman who has been married three times, and has decided that she has had enough of married life. On each show, Arbatova presents a "feminist" viewpoint (counterpoised to a "traditional" woman's viewpoint) on that episode's topic, bringing the word "feminist" into average Russian homes on a weekly basis. I ask the newcomer what she thinks of feminism. She is a high-school math teacher, with a daughter two and a half years old. She plans to go back to work in a few months, this time as a translator – more profitable by far than teaching. Her monthly maternity benefit from the state is laughably small – enough to pay for two cartons of milk. She tells me she has been to Germany, and seen women's feminist clubs there. She was impressed by the women's self-confidence and by the status women had achieved in German society: "Women even drive cars there," she tells me.

Arbatova's goal for Klub Garmoniia is to encourage self-confidence as well. A self-declared feminist, she aims to restore "what's female" to women, and thereby bring a form of equality to Russia's women, while spreading the idea that a feminist can be "feminine," even happy. This is not a popular idea in Russia. Outside the club, and off the air, Arbatova engages in a war of mutual trashing in the pages of one of Moscow's most reputable newspapers, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*. There,

Olga Lipovskaia, the director of Petersburg's Center for Gender Issues, criticizes Arbatova's sometimes "aggressive" style, and laments that Arbatova's image of a feminist is the only one available to Russian television viewers. She accuses Arbatova of hoarding the laurels that go along with being Russia's only "paid telefeminist." Arbatova responds with harsh words for Lipovskaia, accusing her and other women who have received Western grants to support their work in the feminist movement of being behind the times, concerned only about their own salaries, and not about bringing feminist ideas to the population.

June 20, 1995. Galina Klimantova, deputy of the Women of Russia (WOR) political bloc, and head of the Russian legislature's Committee on the Affairs of Women, the Family, and Youth, sits with Mariia Gaidash (also a WOR deputy), surrounded by a group of women activists from various Russian organizations. This is the first of what is supposed to be a series of monthly meetings to exchange ideas and hear proposals from women's groups, which could then be addressed or adopted by WOR, and brought up for discussion in the Duma. The activists raise several acute issues. One is the International Monetary Fund's policy of insisting that Russian enterprises end their tradition of providing social services. These policies have had a deleterious effect on women, as factory-based childcare centers and medical clinics have been shut down. The activists decry the state's failure to consider the effects of the IMF's policy on women. They argue that there is a desperate need for gender-based analysis of legislation in general. And they raise the new problem of abortion – still legal, but no longer provided free by the state. After the meeting, Klimantova writes a sort of "thank you" letter – not specifically to the Russian women with whom she met, but instead to an American-sponsored organization: the Winrock US–NIS Consortium, which arranged the meeting. It turns out to be the last meeting of its kind. A few months later, in the December elections, WOR fails to gain 5 percent of the vote, and is thus excluded as a faction from the parliament.

May 3, 1995. An organization called "Creativity" (Tvorchestvo), whose main business has become teaching women how to repair old clothes and make handicrafts for sale to tourists, gathers together twenty artistic survivors of World War II for a celebration. The women arrive at the first-floor office space of a residential building in Moscow, and sit around a U-shaped cluster of tables, laden with open-faced sandwiches, greens, and vodka. They reminisce about the war, and show each other various and extraordinary works of art, including one woman's portrait

of Lenin that appears to be a line drawing, done in ink, but is in fact embroidered in fine black thread. At the time that the portrait was sewn, its creator could not exhibit it openly because it was not an "official" portrait; it lacked approval by the Communist Party.

Tvorchestvo was founded in 1988, one of the earliest women's groups to form and attempt to gain official recognition. Its original goal was to bring together women in the creative professions – artists, writers, journalists, composers, architects – to socialize and enjoy monthly "club days." As Russia's economy deteriorated, and as women, especially educated women, began to lose their jobs, Tvorchestvo started to offer courses to women, staving off unemployment through craft production and the sale of handmade goods. Tatiana Riabikina, the chairwoman of the organization, had originally dreamed of creating a center for the women's movement: a private residence in Moscow, with a movie theater, an exhibition hall, a library, and a cafe, where women could come together and socialize, share their experiences, support and learn from each other. "We were closer to that goal in 1988 than we are now," she told me. "Now if we teach someone to sew, that's almost good enough."

Until Gorbachev introduced his new policies in the late 1980s, making freedom of speech and association a possibility, rather than a criminal activity, women in the Soviet Union had been essentially voiceless. Before that time, none of the organizations and events described above would have been feasible. Severe penalties were imposed for unsanctioned political or social action. As late as 1986, a demonstration protesting violence against women would have been impossible, much less shown on the evening news.

Political opportunities for social movement organizing and protest in Russia have changed dramatically over the course of the last decade. In 1991, activists in the Soviet Union's nascent women's movement organized the first national women's conference independent of state and Communist Party control. The First Independent Women's Forum, as it was labeled, was a momentous event. Over 200 women descended on Dubna, a small town outside Moscow, for the conference. But state monitoring of grassroots organizing was not yet a thing of the past. On the eve of the conference, permission to hold the event was withdrawn by city authorities. Only after highly placed officials interceded on behalf of the organizers was the conference able to go forward. The First Forum was only the beginning. Women took advantage of their newfound freedoms, creating hundreds of new organizations.

Yet despite the blur of women's organizing activity in today's Russia,

the International Women's Day demonstration in 1996 was atypical. Demonstrations are rare events in the contemporary Russian women's movement. Seminars and conferences are far more prevalent as a means of organizing. Moreover, the demonstrators' demographics revealed another fascinating element of the contemporary movement: the pervasive influence of non-Russians on the development of the women's movement. What was the reason for participation by so many foreigners? Was this a chance display of international sisterhood?

Duma deputy Klimantova's letter in response to the lobbying meeting also highlights the controversial role of foreigners in today's women's movement. How did an American-funded organization come to arrange a meeting between Russian legislators and Russian women's groups? The Russian women's movement is embedded in its international context. Mass communications systems and modern methods of travel have enabled social movements and activist networks to span the entire globe. Activists from countries thousands of miles apart can share literature, attend international conferences, and strategize online with the aid of electronic mail. Governments, foundations, and social movement organizations can share tactical advice across borders, and even fund initiatives abroad. The participation of foreign women in the International Women's Day demonstration was only the tip of the iceberg. International influences affect the Russian women's movement in diverse and complicated ways, sometimes useful, sometimes benign, and sometimes rather problematic.

The Tvorchestvo group's activity points to another axis of women's movement organizing, namely, groups driven by economic need. Economic collapse in Russia in the early 1990s produced a great wave of women's organizing, aiming to counteract the flood of unemployment and to provide mutual support. Tvorchestvo is not a political advocacy group, protesting the society-wide feminization of poverty. Instead, it operates at the individual level. Women bring their handicrafts in, show them to art experts, and discover whether or not there is a niche for them in the handicraft market, at home or abroad. Others take courses in craft production, with the same goal. Many such job-training programs for women exist, often focusing on sewing, embroidery, and handicrafts. Critics question the degree of market demand for such things, and worry that women will be reduced to piecework, deprived of a standard salary and insurance benefits, and excluded from the more organized and more profitable domains within the private sector. Meanwhile, the economic-related groups proliferate. Their chairwomen consider themselves part of a dynamic women's movement, while the women who attend their courses may be quite unconcerned about social

movement participation per se; many have never given a moment's thought to feminism.

Arbatova's experience with Klub Garmoniia and the television program *Ia Sama* reveals some of the complexity of defining feminism in Russia. In Arbatova's view, the club was designed for the psychological rehabilitation of women. The point was to help each woman uncover her own self, and thereby recover her "femininity"; Arbatova believes this should be feminism's central concern. She opposes the idea of pursuing "equal rights," if that means "losing her sex," becoming a man, playing by male rules in a male game. Yet, for several of the club's participants, feminism meant standing up for women's rights. Meanwhile, Arbatova's television show enters average Russian homes, portraying her as a woman who freely calls herself a feminist. But to millions of Russian women, feminism has sinister and foreign overtones. "Gender" is a foreign word with no Russian equivalent. Some activists have imported it directly into Russian (for example, there are several research institutes in Russia called centers "for Gender Studies"), but the term is meaningless to 99 percent of the population. The challenge of spreading ideas about women's oppression and women's rights in a language that all can understand confronts women activists in Russia at every turn.

Also confronting women activists in Russia are the effects of recent political history. The Women of Russia faction that had agreed to meet with activists was in parliament for only two years – from December 1993 to December 1995. WOR's experience is emblematic of the shifting and unstable political alignments in Russia. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, along with its political institutions. In 1993, the Russian parliament was destroyed in a hail of tank fire, and a new legislature created. The women's movement has had to struggle to keep its balance as the ship of state has been tossed around on the waves of reform and reaction. The rules of the political game shift; it is not easy for a social movement to make visible progress.

Today's Russian women's movement is spread far and wide across Russia's immense territory. It includes oldtimers from the pre-glasnost era, and newcomers; women on the left, and women on the right; a few young women, many women in their forties and fifties, and a number of extremely tough women in their sixties. They have joined the women's movement out of various motives, ranging from the desire to gain a political voice to finding a means to forestall personal economic ruin. Russia's transition from communism toward capitalism and a more democratic political arrangement has been both good and bad for women, presenting both obstacles and opportunities for organizing. The

obstacles and opportunities are domestic as well as international. They are cultural, political, economic, and historical.

My personal experience with the Russian women's movement began in 1992, when I attended the Second Independent Women's Forum, the second national conference of the women's movement. Unlike the First Forum, this one took place in the new Russia – no longer under Soviet rule. It was an unforgettable experience. Like its predecessor, the Second Forum took place in Dubna. The conference organizers were overwhelmed by the number of attendees – over 500 women – far more than had been anticipated. They ran out of hotel rooms, and housed me with a local family. The hours of the conference were long. Lida, my host mother, woke me each day at 6 a.m. and hustled me off to the bus stop while it was still dark. The Forum itself took place a few miles away from Lida's apartment, at Ratmino, a "resort hotel" associated with Dubna's Institute for Joint Nuclear Research. I returned home every night utterly exhausted, but excited about the day's events. In the evening Lida fed me delicious chicken dinners, and I played with her daughter Dasha, who badly wanted a Barbie doll. It was the warmth and generosity of Lida's family, and of many of the women I met at the conference, plus their enthusiasm and drive to tell their stories (of organizational success and tragedy), that initially cemented my fascination with the Russian women's movement.

At the Second Forum, I formed a multitude of impressions, many of which centered around the weather. It was the end of November. It was freezing outside, and freezing inside. The Forum was divided into sections, or workshops. Groups of women met in classrooms, in all-purpose rooms, in hallways and lobbies, often wearing their coats.

I came to the Forum equipped with tape-recording equipment, a notebook, a few copies of an article I had written on rape and domestic violence in the Soviet Union, and a bag of political buttons, most bearing a single picture on a light blue background. On the top half of the button, a large black fish with its mouth wide open was chasing after a school of little fish. The lower half of the button sported an inspiring illustration: the little fish had arranged themselves into a large, fish-shaped school, and were going after the big fish. Around the top edge of the button, in large block letters, it said, "ORGANIZE!" The women attending the Forum loved my buttons. I handed one to whomever I sat next to, and, in exchange, met a large number of extremely pleasant and talkative women.

One woman donated a copy of her newly founded newspaper to me, called *Women's Games* (*Zhenskie igry*). It was sort of an erotic newspaper; the cover featured a black-and-white photograph of a naked man in a top

hat, shown from the side. The paper was put out by a women's group in far-off Volgograd, and bore an odd motto: "For the Moral Equality of Men and Women." This was a far cry from the ever-present motto of Soviet newspapers, "Proletarians of the World, Unite!" She asked me to try and send her a copy of *Playgirl*. "It would be really helpful," she said. A few years later, at a large library just outside Moscow, I found recent copies of *Zhenskie igry* – it had apparently survived without ever receiving the desired copy of *Playgirl* from me. On an issue from 1994, an additional motto had been added to the masthead: "Humanity Began with a Matriarchy!" An issue from 1995 replaced both mottoes with a pithy summary of patriarchy: "Patriarchy is when men are favored in everything, and women feel guilty for everything."

The Second Forum was organized around a series of extended workshops on a variety of topics including women and business, unemployment, health, religion, politics, trade unions/the workplace, military conversion, nationalism, rural women, art, and violence against women. At the workshop on violence against women, I watched as Russian women who had been interested in this topic, working separately, on their own, met each other for the first time and began to talk about cooperation. Several of them were later among the founders of the "Sisters" Rape Crisis Center, established in 1993. One of the buttons I had brought to hand out at that workshop said simply, "If she says No, it's Rape." One woman laughed as she took it, saying to her friend, "I'm going to tell my husband about this, and put it right next to our bed!"

It was at the Second Forum that I began to realize how diverse the spectrum of women's organizing was in Russia. There were women providing support for women in business, including training, education, and placement; professional associations; mutual support associations for people with similar problems, such as soldiers' mothers, parents with handicapped children, and women who served in Afghanistan; groups concerned with defending women's rights during privatization; charities; rape crisis centers and shelter projects; and groups promoting feminism and conducting women's studies. A few organizations focused on training women for political leadership. At least eight groups were explicitly concerned with family welfare. One group from Ukraine was dedicated to the preservation of women's creativity and femininity in the face of the Chernobyl disaster. The variety was extraordinary.

The stated purpose of the Second Forum was to provide a strategy session for putting women's issues on Russia's national agenda: the slogan for the Forum was "From Problems to Strategy." The organizers felt that women's issues should be indivisible from the general social transformation that was taking place, not viewed as secondary problems

that would be solved automatically *after* national economic conditions had improved overall. After all, the Bolsheviks, too, had promised that women's position would improve after the economic transformation of society was accomplished. Yet, the most useful service the Forum provided may have been the opportunity for women activists from across the country to engage in networking. Many hours were spent on welcoming ceremonies, where representatives of the more than sixty groups present introduced themselves, one by one, to the Forum participants gathered in a large, cold auditorium. Despite the shortage of time, nearly all the speakers recited their phone numbers, which were urgently scribbled down by other participants. This was the sole chance for these women to find out about each other's existence and exchange such basic information before the next Forum – and no one could predict with any certainty when that might occur.

One afternoon a few years later, while doing the fieldwork for this book, I was sitting in the Women's Archive (hidden away in one room of a scientific institute near Moscow's Semenovskaia metro stop), leafing through its collection on the Second Independent Women's Forum. I uncovered receipts, letters of invitation, and a list of foreign guests – with my own name on it. I held it and marveled for a moment, before getting up and showing it to one of the young women staffing the archive. "I was there!," I bragged. But now it was history. The movement I returned to in the mid-1990s had grown and, in growing, had started displaying some fairly serious growing pains. There were internal divisions – common to all social movements – but certainly shaped by Russia's political history. And there were complications stemming from the Russian movement's location in a politically and economically charged international context. Moreover, the domestic political and economic situation in which the movement was attempting to blossom was troubling at best.

The field research I conducted in Russia between 1994 and 1996 revealed a multifaceted set of opportunities and obstacles facing the contemporary women's movement, as well as a seemingly endless string of questions about the movement's form, and about activists' tactical and strategic choices. The bulk of these questions were addressed during in-depth, semi-structured interviews with sixty-three activists, representing fifty women's organizations (listed in the bibliography).[1] Additional interviews with journalists, academics, other professionals in the field, representatives of the state employment services and the Ministry of Social Protection's Women's Department, and several

[1] Shorter informal interviews were also conducted with a handful of additional activists.