ABSTRACT

THE GENDER SYSTEM OF CARELIA (1950-2000)

Tatyana Yarovaya, Department of Historical Studies, Petrozavodsk State University, Russia

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The concepts of "gender system" and "gender contract" examined by a Swedish women's researcher Yvonne Hirdman in terms of the Swedish history can also be applied to the history of Carelia (1950-2000), the north-western republic of the Russian Federation due to the universality of the gender system concept.

Two kinds of gender contracts can be distinguished in the Soviet Karelia (1950-1985), one for the countryside and one for the rapidly expanding urban areas. According to a defence strategy of the Soviet State adopted in 1920s, processing industries were not developed in the border area of the republic, situated to the west of the railroad Murmansk-Leningrad, and therefore, local Carelian people was primarily occupied in agriculture and forest cutting. For that reason, the patriarchal ways of life remained there longer than in the towns, i.e. industrial centres.

By contrast, paper and pulp industry, tractor and shipbuilding, and heat and power production industry etc. were rising up in the area east of the railroad, populated mostly by Slavs. There was a huge labour force demand in 1944-1949, caused by the mass repressions and war losses, filled up by women, doing mainly unskilled poorly-paid work (1939 - 37,7% women of total labour force, 1970 - 53-54%). Fear of under-population (the birth-rate had fallen down by the middle of the 1960th) forced the Soviet State to initiate social reforms to make easier the burden of a working mother: day-care centres, pioneer camps, child allowances, maternity leaves were particularly introduced on a massive scale in 1960s-1970s.

"Perestroika" (1985-1991) made the Soviet values and ways of life a subject of a sharp criticism, an idea of a “women's natural destination” became extremely popular. According to Mikhail Gorbachev: “Women must be freed and allowed to stay at home longer”. This can be explained by wish to eliminate/diminish covert unemployment estimated at 30 – 50% of the total labour force of the USSR. In the beginning of the transitional phase (1991-2000) Russia was struck by a catastrophic economic crisis fully shared by Carelia, followed by severe decline of its economics. Mostly struck were women: 74% of the dismissed labour force.

The paradox of the Carelia’s democratic development is reflected by men/women representation in the decision-making process: in the Soviet Karelia women's representation of the legislative assemblies throughout the examined period was approximately 35%, while now it is about 17% (2002). While the social programs are being cut down, the birth rate has fallen down from 2,0 births per woman in 1989 to 1,1 in 1997. The process of depopulation in well under way, with the population nearing 800 thousand in late 1980s, that now is around 740 thousand.

The welfare gap between the well-to-do and the bulk of the population is growing. While the contract of a "working mother" is functioning as it was in the Soviet Era, at the same time, the process of poverty feminisation is progressing.