SOVIET WOMAN AND BODY-POLITICS: THE CASE OF MATERNITY

Yulia Gradskova, Baltic and East European Graduate School, Södertörn Hoögskola, Sweden

Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Introduction

Woman’s body, in difference to male’s is connected to the possibility of pregnancy and childbirth. In different periods of time, in different cultures for women from different strata the discriminative gender ideology was stressing different reasons of importance or non-importance, pleasure or horrors of motherhood. As it is known, after October revolution (1917) in Russia women were declared equal to men – they were expected to participate in social life and to work outside of home not less than men. However, from the beginning of the Soviet era communist ideology was showing big interest in protection of motherhood, which led to a special positioning of the figure of the mother as tied to the child and separated from gender equality discourse. Briefly the gender ideological construction in Russia could be formulated as “Woman is equal to man, but mother is not that woman who is equal”. The discourses of equality and motherhood belonged to two different fields.

Every woman of the soviet generation had to deal with this paradoxic formula. That is why I find especially interesting to look on the personal perception of the motherhood by women from the soviet generation. This presentation shows some results of ongoing research dedicated to the gender aspects of the problems of body representations and body politics in the soviet period and is based on the analysis of the popular printed materials and biographical interviews with women of the Soviet generation.

The presentation is centered around analysis of the popular magazines “Rabotnitsa” (1945-58) and “Zdorovie” (1955-60) and interviews with three women of the first soviet generation (born in 1920s) living now in Moscow.

The main method of this work is discourse analysis of printed material and women’s narratives about their experience of maternity. I understand experience in poststructuralist terms according to which “parallels can be drawn between the processes of analyzing and understanding literature and the process of analyzing and understanding individual’s behavior or their accounts of their experience”. Post-structuralism, thus, denies authenticity to individual experience. Because my informants are telling the story of the past, I also have to pay attention to the problem of memory work in their attempt of presenting their past experience in the situation of contemporary transitional Russia.

Magazine’s presentation of motherhood - politics of alienation of mother’s body

I will start with a brief analysis of the material from two popular magazines of the period which are dedicated to this problem. First of them, “Rabotnitsa” was especially focused on women’s ideological enlightenment. This magazine was extensively used by researchers for analysis of ideological propaganda of gender norms and gender relations. The second - “Zdorovie” (“Health”) was created as part of the post-stalinist reforms process and is much less studied.

---

1 Gavey, Nicila Feminist post-structuralism and discourse analysis”/ Toward a new psychology of gender (a reader), (Mary Gergen and Sara Davis eds.), Rutledge, 1997, p.55
The task of reflection on the problems of motherhood in “Rabotnitsa”, aimed first of all as it is clear from its title, to make propaganda of work for the socialist economy looks very problematic. That is why the magazine is concentrating on the harmony between state ideology and motherhood, declaring the state care for mothers and happy results of the motherhood in the socialist state. The first issue of “Rabotnitsa” in 1955 starts from a declaration: “It was made so, so much for the woman-mother by our Communist party and by our Soviet power in the way of realization of Lenin’s projects!” Obviously, the gratitude from the mother for this care was expected as well. Thus, an article from the second issue (year 1952) gives us a picture of the widow with three son’s. Their father died during the war and all of them became students of the military college (svorovtsi) that gives feeling of the pride to the mother. This pride for children is becoming the most characteristic feature of the presentation of the motherhood.

Even in the case when father is alive, mother is presented as uniquely dealing with children of different ages. State is entitled to take important role in children’s upbringing, but its help is directed to the mother and not to the family.

Magazine “Zdorovie” is less bound by the ideology of “woman working equally to man outside of home”. In the issue 3 (1958) in an article called “Word about woman” we can read such very patriarchal statement: “A woman! This word is connected with care and tenderness, love to work and passion, self-sacrifice and loyalty. Woman is a mother, educator of the future generations, truthful friend and help to a man”. Thus, “Zdorovie” publications about motherhood, from my viewpoint, are more cloth to the “intensive motherhood” scheme, described by American sociologist Sharon Hays.3

The difference between “woman” (who could have connotations of equality with man, work for socialist economy, be activist) and “mother”, an Other, directly depending from her biological capacity and instincts we can literary see in the next passage from the article “Hygiene of the pregnant woman” (Rabotnitsa”, 1946, N 7): “Pregnancy is not an illness, this is normal, natural stage for the female organism when woman is planning to become a mother.”

In spite “woman should become a mother” the process itself is presented as “natural” and, thus, not needing explication. Magazine practically does not give examples of this process, does not explain it even from the medical view point, does not present any feelings or problems of mothers except this feeling of the final pride for the product - grown up, ideologically correct child. It is not even the problem of Kristeva’s “non said”4, because the problem here is not in “non-complete” presentation of the body of the mother, but in its omission at all.

The only present body of the mother is the controlled body, a body as an object of the hygiene politics. However, body-object of hygiene is presented as a kind of industrial resource, not as part of the “mother” construction. The state has a silent agreement with woman with respect to this object – mean for a production of children. The main aim of this agreement is presented as child well being. And hygiene together to food and cloth is one of its most important components.

The practical medical information about pregnancy and childbirth is almost absent in both magazines in 1950s and starts to appear in “Zdorovie” only from 1960s. Thus, issue 2 from 1960 has an article about problems of the last period of pregnancy and explains the need to be put in the hospital. In the same issue appears information about special recreation center for pregnant women near Moscow where they not only receive good food and have break from the work, but also get knowledge about childbirth. “Only unknown is very fearful. But when the young woman who is planning to deliver her first baby (pervorodyaszhaya) get a knowledge about her own possibility to influence on the process of delivery – it is necessary only to manage her breathing and remember several not complicated commands – all the fears which could make her feel bad would disappear”.

---

3 “The cultural model of intensive mothering, after all, suggests that all the troubles of the world can be solved by the individual efforts of superhuman women” - Hays, Sharon, The cultural contradictions of motherhood, Yale university press, 1996, 177.

4 “No signifier can cover body of the mother completely, for the signifier is always meaning, communication or structure, whereas a mother-woman is rather a strange “fold” which turns nature into culture, and the “speaking subject” into biology”- Kristeva, Julia, Stabat Mater /The female body in Western culture (S.Suleiman ed.), Harvard University Press, 1986, 119.
Few attention is paid by magazines to emotional relationships between child and mother. The soviet society looks unacquainted with psychoanalysis and all the relational problems in the family. Maternal love as well as children’s love to mother is taken for granted.

Motherhood in women’s narratives:
“I did not have time to think about myself”

First of all it is necessary to give some information about general characteristics of the narratives used for research. Majority of my informants were presenting narrative containing mainly two parts – emotional stories about childhood (parents, school education, early experience of work) and “official stories” constructed according to the norms of public biography – studies, places of work and reasons of their changes, dates of marriages and divorces, information about birth of children. The production of the narrative about pregnancy and childbirth was very difficult task for my informants. While asked about motherhood, they were very happy to speak about children’s and grandchildren’s successes (in school, family life, work, etc.). But when I was asking about pregnancy and child birth, women usually were ready only to answer to some concrete questions being not able to compose a story. 

(V., about delivery) “Everything was natural, by itself (samo soboi)”.

In some cases (as in the case of interview with Elithaveta) my questions about pregnancy were broken by proposing me to show family pictures.

The situation of pregnancy is described by my informants mainly as neutral – (E.) “I was working as usually” or, in case some problems, as negative (V.) “It was not pleasant when first you have nausea, vomiting.... that were the first months. And then, ordinary life, nothing special.”

Also one of my informants noted change of her physical appearance which bothered her. (V.) “I felt a little ashamed when it was visible”.

My informants presented themselves as never having question if they should or should not have children. Nor they produce a thinking about would they or would not be good mothers, would they or would not be able to combine work with motherhood. Life of most of them, even in a case of having high education was lacking practical choice with respect to motherhood, it is present in the narratives according to the patterns of the traditional society. The choices, opened by the Soviet power, were very important, but were located in other field – choice of spouse and choice of education. Motherhood did not belong to the matters of choice. (V.) “How it was that I got three children? We did not think and did not count especially”.

(E.) “There was not any kind of love, it was an accident”.

Pregnancy and child birth were not reflected or widely discussed even in private conversations. May be it is a reason of difficulties to make a story about this part of their life from the side of my respondents. On the other hand as we could see from the analysis of the magazines, the communist propaganda was stressing special contract between state and mother, where the state did not expect full time motherhood or intensive motherhood (model of Hays). This propaganda helped do not see pregnancy, childbirth, being parent and, even single parent, as contradiction to social activism, studies and work.

However, real life in women’s stories fully contradicts to the propagandistic picture of this contract. As magazines analysis shows till 1960s state fail to introduce any system of education which could inform women about their body functioning at least in medical terms. The hospitals did not exist in many places in the countryside or were lacking qualified personal. Indeed all the previous systems of transition of knowledge and help (first of all midwives’ practices) were severely criticized and frequently destroyed. Thus, women’s narratives show spectacular ignorance of their bodies and childcare techniques.

---

5 I gave substitute names to my informant for better understanding of text by the readers. Thus, I have narrative by Elithaveta (Eth.), born in Sevastopol (1919, mother was actress and father was a worker); Varvara (V.) born in Riazan region (1924, mother was a peasant and then housewife, father was a peasant, a worker, then an officer in the ministry of forests); Elena (E.), born in Tula (1927, mother was a schoolteacher, father was a medical doctor).
“Everything was hidden from me. I was completely stupid as my (daughter’s name) thought that if she would be kissed she stop to be a virgin (devushka).”

“I came home, took away the diapers from the baby and do not know what to do with it.”

In the real life as pictured by my informants, state also failed to protect mother after childbirth. While not very ideologically engaged women still could dedicate some time to self care and newborn care, more politically active women should demonstrate their “equality” and “consciousness” and do not use even officially declared one month of the maternity leave after childbirth.

One of my informants, Elithaveta, presenting herself as “I was a communist” and during whole war and post war time director of village school, gave birth to 4 children. In her narrative she frequently stressed that she did not have time for children because of her work and social activity, after birth of the last one (1950) she had to start teaching (it was a beginning of the school year) several days after she was back from hospital.

Another informant, Elena, told me a story of her being a single parent. In 1951-58 she was working in the state security organization and gave birth to her daughter in 1954. While describing first comments of her colleagues on her pregnancy she mentions very positive and “ideologically correct” reaction:

First my mother said me, you see, you are just 26, thus you should have a child, then you do not know how everything would happen in your life. And men-soldiers, we had wise men (muzhiki): “Lena, do not be so worried, who knows how would be your life. There are few men of your age, all of them are killed (in the war – Y.G.). May be you would not marry at all. But a child, it is all, it means that you have a family”. They were right, it was like this.

However, in several years she was dismissed from her work place, explicitly - because of her qualifications. She commented, however, that, according to her opinion, the real reason was non-correspondence of her family status to the status of organization.

My third informant, Varvara, was telling me a story of giving up for several years her education after the consequent birth of two children (in 1946 and 1949) and becoming a housewife. Her future life, however, shows that so characteristic for the time discourse of “priority of education” played important role in her life. After living several years in Sverdlovsk as housewife with husband and two children she came back to Moscow with children (and for several years without husband) and succeed to finish her education. Later she worked as a head of industrial designers’ department.

Thus, stories of my informants show that in spite of the official declarations of non-discrimination of women and support of the mothers, the process of becoming mother usually involved problems with work, living place, maintenance and health.

Another problem affecting mothers’ real life was problem of childcare. In spite of all the propaganda of communist communal socialization of children, according to the stories of my informants, state childcare facilities in these years were practically inaccessible even in Moscow. For accomplish their contract with the state women had to go back to traditional peasant way of childcare – first of all using help of older women (mothers and mothers-in-low) as well as help of sisters and older women neighbors. As I said before, Varvara’s first two children were cared by her mother-in-law, the last one – by her mother.

“She (the daughter) was with my mother. I was squeezing milk, then put it outside of the window.”

While the state failed as a good partner of the mother, the father in real life, as well as in communist propaganda, was not very involved in parental activity. According to all the stories, fathers were not aloud (and it was not a topic for a protest from their side or side of the mother) to the hospitals, where the birth took place. No were they helpful in childcare.

“Both of us were working and I do not remember that the father was doing something with them (with the children – Y.G.)

In this situation of overwork and insecurity together with the propaganda of the motherhood “as an unquestionable good”, women sometimes were using their status of “mother” for getting goods and positions inaccessible from the “gender equality” status. Mother’s position could be used as a social capital, convert its bearer in a “non-ordinary”, “privilege” person.

For example, Varvara, not simply had to stop her studies for some period of time, but could get permission for it, which might be impossible in other case. But, the most extraordinary in this sense is Elena’s story about improving her living conditions: “How I could get (viziganila) my living place? Easy, very easy” Now she even presents her decision of having child not only as “I loved children very
much”, but also as “I even had a commercial idea”. Being a single parent, she could get a new good room in a communal flat in place of living in old wooden barrack.

Thus, it is possible to say that narratives about motherhood give more complicated picture of women’s practices dealing with their bodies and presenting themselves as mothers during the Soviet post-war period. The main discourses of motherhood could be viewed as combination of patriarchal “naturalness” of woman-mother and communist ideology of motherhood as a state contract with woman about use of her body.

Conclusions

The analysis of the magazines and women’s narratives of the 1940-50s shows that ideological discourse of motherhood did not pay attention to women’s body, concentrating on the results of the mother’s activity and leaving “lived body” of the mother without words. Women belonging to this generation have difficulties in producing narratives about their experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, presenting themselves mainly according to rules of equality discourse. However, following the rules of this discourse, they fail to support its main idea, stating by words of one of my informants, Elithaveta, that “It is possible, that for men it was easier to live “.

---