RENEGOTIATING CITIZENSHIP: GENDER AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Suvi Salmenniemi, University of Helsinki, Finland

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Introduction

The social transformation process and a shift from state socialism to a (more or less) liberal democracy in Russia has entailed a re-articulation of the relationship between the state and civil society and between public and private, and consequently, a redefinition of citizenship. In this process, the reorganization of gender identities and relations is a central component.

This paper examines the interconnections between civil society, citizenship and gender by analyzing representations of masculinity and femininity and their interrelationship in the context of social-political organization in contemporary Russia. I ask what kind of gendered meanings are attributed to civic activism (non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements) and ask what kind of gendered agency they produce. Through analyzing civic activism, I also examine how institutional politics (political parties, government, parliament) is gendered, as these two social-political spheres are constructed in relation to each other.

Independent civic activism in Russia is essentially a result of the democratization and pluralization of the Russian society, which has opened new possibilities to organize and to publicly reflect and question many of the Soviet practices and discourses. However, two important dimensions have been ignored in the current scholarly discussion on post-soviet civil societies have been ignored. First, research has concentrated mainly either on theoretical and conceptual discussion concerning civil society, its fruitfulness or problematic nature in the post-socialist context, or on studying various forms of social-political activism by quantitative survey methods. By contrast, empirically grounded qualitative analyses, which would transmit NGO activists’ own interpretations concerning their activity, is lacking. The need of such a qualitative enquiry, however, is manifested e.g. in those numerous studies dealing with the difficulties and misunderstandings in the encounters between ‘East’ and ‘West’, reflected especially in the context of feminist studies and the women’s movement (see e.g. Scott et al. 1997, Funk & Mueller 1993). Thus, if we are to understand what is ‘Russian civil society’, we indeed have to ask the social-political actors how they frame their goals and position themselves vis-a-vis the state, family and local community.

Second, empirical analyses on the gendered aspects of civil society are very limited. An exception is the Russian women’s movement, which has been studied empirically quite extensively e.g. by Sperling (1999), Kay (2000), Racioppi & See (1997) and Temkina (1997). However, there is lack of such an empirical qualitative research on Russian civic activism, which would consist of not only women’s organizations but also of other social and political organizations, and of interviews with both men and women activists. Such an enquiry is needed because in order to draw some general conclusions about women’s social-political activism and the gendering practices within the whole field of social-political organization, we need to study also other forms of organization than explicitly feminist or women-specific groups. Probing into analyzing the various channels that women and men use to organize and the meanings they give to their activities can inform us, whether they differ from each other, and if they do, how and why.
The aim of this paper is to address specifically these thus far ignored dimensions, i.e. to study civil society by qualitative research methods and from a gender perspective. The main argument in this paper is that in post-socialist Russia prevails a gender-based polarization in social-political organization. Political agency and citizen identities are gendered so that civic activism is associated with femininity and institutional politics with masculinity, and these spheres are portrayed as quite distanced and separated from each other. My analysis is mostly concentrated on the discursive level, but I also briefly ponder upon how the gender-bound divisions manifest themselves at the structural level; how women and men actually participate and are positioned in NGOs and institutional politics. I hypothesize that there has occurred a feminization of civic activism in Russia in the 1990s, which is linked to the discursive shifts in conceptualizing civil society.

I study my research questions through one locality, a provincial town of Tver’ located in Central Russia, where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork during six months in 2001-2002. The analysis in this paper is based on 28 interviews with representatives of various NGOs. In addition, three interviews with representatives of international donor agencies and four interviews with local civil servants are also included in the analysis.

I begin this paper by briefly discussing the key concepts used in this paper, after which I move on to analyze how femininity and masculinity are represented in the interview material. I end this paper by examining gender divisions in social-political organization at the structural level.

Civil society, citizenship and gender

The concepts of civil society, citizenship, gender and public-private are closely intertwined. Civil society is an arena for practicing citizenship and defining its conditions e.g. by re-negotiating the public-private boundary. According to Sperling et al. (2001), civic activism often takes place on the boundary between public and private, and it has traditionally been occupied by women. The changing relations between the state and civil society and private and public cannot be understood without an analysis of the gender system, as gender is a central structuring principle of social relations and a primary way of signifying relationships of power (cf. Scott 1986).

The conceptual pair of public and private is a key operational category in classical political thought, and a central target of feminist re-thinking. Public-private has traditionally referred to two distinctions: the state vs. society (i.e. public vs. private ownership), and the state and society vs. the domestic sphere of home and intimate relations. In the first distinction civil society is placed in the private and in the latter in the public. (Okin 1991, 68) Indeed, this clearly points to the problematic and fluid nature of the public-private division. In this paper, I analyze how the boundary between public and private is articulated and how and where it is drawn in the context of civic activism. I do not assume the relation between the spheres to be static or clear-cut, but instead conceptualize it as a continuum, which is constantly under negotiation and subject to historical and cultural variation.

1 My reading is inspired by discourse analysis. By discourse I refer to ways of representing, describing, naming, explaining and hierarchizing phenomena and their interrelationship, be that femininity/masculinity, East/West, we/other etc. Discourses are always selective, they open a certain perspective to the phenomena and mark off other ways of representing it. Discourses are practices of producing meanings; hence they also have real consequences for structuring of social relations and social reality. (cf. Hall 1999, 98-99)

2 I have interviewed representatives of donor agencies and the local government, because they co-operate (more or less closely) with NGOs. Their ideas concerning gender and civic activism can therefore be considered to influence the development of the NGO sector. Interviews with the following three NGOs form the main bulk of the material (altogether 23 interviews): a feminist organization, a legal advice organization and a local branch of the trade union of medical workers. In addition interviews were conducted in a veterans’ organization, a non-feminist women’s organization, a sports organization and in the Communist party and in a pro-Kremlin political party. Of the interviewed 24 were female and 11 male and their age varied from 20 to 78 years. All but two of the interviewees had higher education. I have previously published about this material in Salmenniemi (2002).

3 Obviously national identity and its re-definition is also an important aspect here, but I am not able to discuss that in the scope of this paper.
Civil society is a contested and highly debated concept in social theory and research. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the communist system, it gained an increasing popularity both in scholarly vocabulary as well as in political debate in Russia and Eastern Europe. It has been debated e.g. whether there existed civil society in state socialist countries\(^4\), what does or even how should the post-socialist civil society look like (Which models to adopt; American? Scandinavian?; Is civil society loads of NGOs, third sector partnership with the state, or voluntary associations acting as a watchdog for the state?), and indeed what is ‘civil society’ (how to define it, what is included in it?) and whether it is at all a fruitful concept for analyzing post-socialist societies\(^5\).

I approach here civil society in a two-fold way. First, I perceive it as a social sphere that is analytically independent of and to varying degrees empirically differentiated from the state, the commercial market sphere and the family and immediate primary relations (cf. Alexander 1998). Civil society provides a space for individuals to negotiate the relationship vis-à-vis the state and local community, i.e. to rethink citizen identities. Secondly, civil society is not however only a set of institutions and organizations, but it is also a discourse which organizes social world and produces and maintains boundaries between public and private, between ‘economics’, ‘family’ and ‘politics’ (Gal 1997, 34); it is precisely because of this that the gendered analysis of civil society is of utmost importance. Like Peggy Watson (1997, 26) notes, the formation of civil society in Eastern Europe and Russia has meant the mobilization of the very differences that under communism were a matter of political irrelevance (class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender etc.). Discourse becoming possible and the personal becoming political are two sides of the very same process.

Citizenship in the Soviet Union was differentiated according to gender. Women’s citizenship was constructed on the dual role of ‘working mother’, the ideological emphasis shifting from ‘work’ to ‘motherhood’ depending on the demographic and economic imperatives. Masculine citizen identity, by contrast, was constructed on paid work, military and leadership in the economic and political spheres. Both men and women were expected to participate in political activity in the official public, but there existed a gender-bound hierarchy: men dominated the Soviet political elite whereas women’s political citizenship was practiced mainly through trade unions, official women’s groups and local soviets. As men dominated the official public, women by contrast dominated the private sphere, men as husbands and fathers having a quite weak role. The different citizen identities for men and women were legitimized by the Soviet gender ideology based on a dual strategy of simultaneously emphasizing ‘equality’ (avoiding sexual difference by interpreting men and women as ‘similar’, without questioning male dominance) and ‘difference’ (natural sexual difference as an explanatory framework for gender differences in all spheres of life) (Liljeström 1993,1995; Attwood 1990; Temkina & Rotkirch 1997; Ashwin 2000; Kon 1995).\(^6\) In what follows, I will ponder upon how gendered (political) citizen identities are re-negotiated in the context of post-socialist civil society.

**Altruistic women and self-interested men**

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\(^4\) Some, like Michael Urban (1997), claim that we cannot talk about civil society in the context of state socialist countries. Others, like Chris Hann (1996), have criticised civil society discussion for sticking in Western, individualistic models, which ignore the everyday human interaction and informal practises, which were of central importance in state socialist societies. Gal (1997), Pilkington (1992) and Watson (1997) have criticised civil society theories for conceptualising civil society as a universal and neutral space without paying attention to power relations (based on class, gender, ethnic etc. distinctions) that constitute it.

\(^5\) E.g. Vadim Volkov (1996, 90-91) has noted that the Russian word for civil society (grazhdanskoe obshchestvo) does not carry historical roots with it, but has rather operated as an inspiring (and obviously ideological) symbol, than as a fruitful concept for scientific analysis.

\(^6\) The Bolshevik revolution aimed at creating the ‘new man’ and establishing a direct link between the state and citizens, without any interfering mediators. The idea of the new man was from the outset a gendered construction, identifying different citizenship virtues and identities for men and women. The uneasy balance between ‘equality’ and ‘difference’ was thus already present in the early Bolshevik conceptualizations on gender relations, and was further reinforced by the Stalinist regime.
I now turn to analyze the representations of femininity and masculinity and their interrelationship in the context of civic activism. What kind of gendered meanings the interviewees attribute to civic activism? The absolute majority of all the interviewed interpret civic activism as a feminine sphere. By contrast, institutional politics is interpreted unambiguously as masculine. Also the majority of interviewees consider women usually to form the “overall mass” in the organizations, i.e. they are executors and performers, whereas men are perceived to dominate the decision-making and leadership positions. Hence, political agency emerge as clearly gendered in the interviews.

I have located in the interviews two general, broad discursive frameworks for making sense gender differences: a discourse of natural sexual difference and a discourse of gendering social and cultural practices. They both operate as meta-discourses in explaining gender differences and take up different forms in more limited discourses.

The discourse of natural sexual difference is based on essentialist assumptions on gender identities. By essentialism I refer to an idea of a 'genuine essence' of femininity and masculinity, which is perceived as universal, natural and normative. It builds on an assumption of a biological/sexual foundation, upon which identities are grounded. Essentialist discourse presumes that sexual difference determines qualities, capacities and characters that men and women hold. From this innate difference logically follows that men and women are considered to have different motivation and interests, and consequently they position differently in society. Hence, essentializing is a way of gendering and categorizing social world.

The assumption of natural sexual difference manifest itself in a discourse of altruistic women vs. self-interested men, which represents women as altruistic and morally superior, and men as pursuing one's own interest and material benefits. This discursive framework comes up most often in the interviews and is shared by both men and women. In the following examples the interviewees explain why in their opinion women are more active in NGOs:

Women, they somehow feel responsibility for society, in a sense that they feel more responsibility for humankind, may be, for younger generation, for children. Because of that, whatever social problems, I suppose, women feel them first, and quicker.

Donor organization, female, b. 1965

I: Why are women in your opinion more active?
R: (pause) I don't know. In my opinion, that all manifests itself already at the biological level.
I: But what do the men do if they don’t take part in the civic organizations? Where are the men? What do they do?
R: Men also try to break through there [to NGOs], but their interests for that are different. Motivation is different. They want to become leaders. Many of them. They pursue power. Not in order to make life better in the planet, but in order to become commanders.

Feminist organization, male, b. 1952

7 I have analyzed gender at two levels in the interviews, drawing from a grouping suggested by Marja Keränen (1993, quoted in Vuori 2001, 85). First, I have paid attention to what is explicitly said about men and women (In which contexts gender is taken up? What is defined as masculine/feminine? What is perceived as gender neutral?) and secondly, I have read implicit gendered assumptions (What gendered states of affair are represented as natural and unquestioned? When is gender left unproblematic?).

8 Following Stuart Hall's (1999) line of thinking about stereotyping strategies, I summarize essentializing discourse to operate in the following way:
1. It simplifies, naturalizes and solidifies gender differences;
2. It produces an idea of complementarity, gender-based dichotic matrixes, which are clearly demarcated (e.g. femininity/masculinity, nature/culture, emotion/reason, domestic/public); this process of creating binary pairs is part of creating and maintaining social and symbolic structures;
3. Through the production and reproduction of gendered dichotomies and complementarity, essentializing discourse cleans away power relations and denies asymmetry, and hence maintains male dominance and female subordination.
Work and leading position in the non-commercial sector, I would say, is more difficult than business, politics and running the state affairs. Men search where it’s easier. (laugh) But in order to work in the non-commercial sector, one has to have persistence, patience, ability for self-sacrifice, female wisdom. (...) And it is ungrateful work in a sense that there's no wide reputation, great victories, or a conquest of Mount Everest involved in it. (...) A man has to have a quick victory with a low cost. A woman doesn’t need that...

Donor organization, female, b. 1969

A central element in the discourse of altruistic women vs. self-interested men is the idea of complementarity. Characteristics attributed to femininity and masculinity are constructed in relation to each other: women are more social, caring, persistent and patient than men, and men are more individualistic, egoistic, belligerent and power-hungry compared to women. As a consequence, civic activism and institutional politics get very different meanings: civil society is “common good” and “pure” whereas institutional politics is pursuing one’s own interest, power and “dirty”. As femininity and masculinity are defined in relation to each other, so are also institutional politics and civic activism. The last excerpt above also implies that women themselves choose the NGO sector, because they do not "descend" to pursue "quick victories with low cost" - i.e. women are morally superior compared to men. Of course, this denial of the value of institutional politics can also be a way of explaining away the fact that women are absent from it.

This reference to women’s moral superiority and altruism is not, however, anything particularly ‘post-Soviet’. There is a rich cultural historical tradition in Russia and the USSR that has produced and reproduced this idea symbolically, ideologically and institutionally in various forms in different historical times. For example, in the famous terrorist organization “Narodnaia volia” in the end of the 1800s, there were many female members, who devoted their lives to bringing about radical social reforms. In the Tsarist Russia there was also a tradition of philanthropy carried out by aristocratic women. Later, in the Soviet Union, especially during the Stalinist regime, the state used women as instruments of social control by encouraging women to control male behavior and to work as “disciplining agents”, for example in the battle against drunkenness. Women activists (obshchestvennitsy)9 fared a battle against their husbands’ “uncultured behavior” and were also the key actors in the campaign for kul’turnost’10 during the Stalin era (Buckley 2001a & b; Ashwin 2000, 12). This cultural historical background is a meaningful intertextual knot, which can help to explain why contemporary civic activism is associated with such femininely marked attributes as self-sacrifice, altruism and moral superiority, and why femininity is not associated with power and independence. Interestingly enough, the altruistic discourse seems to echo also the Soviet ethos of sacrificing one’s own particularistic interests for the universal needs of the collective.

The discourse of altruistic women vs. self-interested men portrays both men and women active but in different sectors. However, there is also a subdiscourse, referred to both by male and female activists, which constructs women’s active agency by contrasting them to passive men. This men’s presumed passiveness is interpreted to oblige women to be active. However, women take this active stand somewhat reluctantly, only because men cannot take it (although they should and they have in the history).

Here for us it has happened so that women, they regard themselves as bearers of everything, the family hearth and at work. They took for themselves a leading position because of men’s passivity, I suppose. Because our men are inert. And so happened for us, I suppose, perhaps not historically, but in our time.

Trade union of medical workers, female, b. 1939

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9 These women activists were educated ‘new women’, married to managers, civil servants and military officers. However, they were never perceived as “first-rank” workers, but as assistants to their husbands and they mainly performed traditionally feminine tasks, like helping in the kindergartens and schools and cleaning in factories. (Buckley 2001a&b)

10 Kul’turnost’ refers to the aim of the Soviet regime to create a sophisticated homo soveticus. Kul’turnost’ denotes a minimum codes of proper behaviour in the public, including avoiding cursing and spitting, being familiar with classical literature and music etc. (Dunham 1976).
This speech about passive men echoes the Soviet ‘demasculinization discourse’, i.e. the presumed inability of Russian men to be active agents in their lives (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 1999, 23, quoted in Rotkirch 2000, 268; Liljeström 1995, 262-263; Attwood 1990). Soviet men were often portrayed as weak: inappropriately feminine, irresponsible, shiftless (Ashwin 2000, 17). The cultural ideal of a Soviet “superwoman” was interpreted to cause this demasculinization.

One can also read strong heteronormativity from the interviews. Heterosexual marriage/relationship is taken as a self-evident starting point, which is not problematized at all. Even the feminist organization, which most explicitly deconstructs gender, politicizes sexuality only in the framework of motherhood, by questioning the Soviet/Russian hegemonic way of approaching femininity first and foremost through motherhood. I sensed that the feminist activists in Tver’ felt their heterosexual identity being placed under question (as the common label for feminists in Russia is a “men-hating lesbian”), and consequently they felt the need to emphasize heterosexual identity. This could be one explanation for the hesitation to question heteronormativity.

**Various essentialisms**

Although essentialism operates as the hegemonic framework for making sense gender differences, the degrees of essentialism vary in the interviews. The ‘strong/explicit essentialism’ draws the explanation for men’s and women’s characteristics and positions in society explicitly from biological factors. It establish very rigid boundaries between men’s and women’s proper spheres of activity.

> Oh, frankly speaking, let rather guys be leaders. Why? Because a man is a man. He always makes decisions, a woman, she is a leader by her nature, but my purely subjective opinion is that a woman has to take care of the family, the house, kids. A housewife she cannot be either, she goes out of her mind, if she's only a housewife. But we have a very good tandem with my boss (…). He is a strategist, I am a tactician. (…) How to change the situation [to have more female leaders in NGOs]? I don’t think it needs to be changed, let women give birth, because in Tver’ the most awful thing is that mortality rate exceeds birth rate. (…) But I can say honestly and with pride that in our committee of youth affairs we have TWO mothers. (…) And this way I with my boss fulfill our mission, we increase birth rate, change the demography in town.

Civil servant, female, b. 1962

In this excerpt all the essentializing strategies are present: naturalization and solidification of gender differences (“a man is a man”), clear-cut dichotomy, whose poles are perceived as complementary (tandem; tactician/strategist; woman at home and as a man's helper at work/ man holding leadership at work and in NGOs) and the representation of the gender hierarchy as natural and not as something that is an outcome of historical and cultural processes. The interviewee states that in youth organizations, boys are always leaders and girls are executors, and this is how it should also be. This also neatly illustrates how discourses definitely have their practical dimension: they actively organize and produce social reality and power relations. In the above excerpt, the interviewee very clearly uses her power as a key official in the youth affairs to define proper positions and spheres for boys and girls, encouraging boys to lead and girls to give birth. It is hence hardly surprising or incidental that in the social council of youth affairs in Tver’, comprising civil servants and representatives of youth organizations, there are no women represented (except the interviewed civil servant).

Somewhat less essentialist version recognizes the role of cultural traditions and socialization in shaping gender differences, but nevertheless assumes some sort of biological core.

> I: It's difficult to explain why men react so aggressively.
> R: They are brought up so from the diapers. You are a soldier, you are a defender… And then, apparently a male physiology influences a bit as well. A man - he is a male. And males are always aggressive.
Feminist organization, female, b. 1952

*Weak/implicit essentialism*, however, does not explicitly connect femininity to sexual/biological differences. It nevertheless assumes a foundation upon which femininity and masculinity are grounded, and which directs their channels of and motivation for participation.

[women are more active in NGOs] because they worry more about society. Everything that is connected to society, sociability, communication. They are more social than men.

Legal advice organization, male, b. 1979

There is also a lot of hesitation and uncertainty voiced in the interviews concerning explanations for gender differences. Many start answers with phrases like: "I suppose", "May be", "I don't know". Perhaps this hesitation can be interpreted as a sign of questioning gender definitions at some level? Hesitation could signal that explanatory frameworks are in flux, because representations of masculinity and femininity have become more plural since the Soviet times (Or is it that the hegemonic representation is still the natural difference between and complementarity of femininity and masculinity, but it’s only being manifested in more multiple ways?). The interviewees seem not totally certain about what causes differences; hence there is room for re-interpretation, which can also open possibilities to politicize gender.

Occasionally there exist simultaneously two different and apparently contradictory discursive frameworks: discourse of natural sexual difference and discourse of gender-neutrality. This discursive shift appears especially in men’s interviews. In the next excerpt, a civil servant from the health care department assesses, whether it matters that the chairwoman of the trade union of medical workers is a woman:

I don't care if it’s a man or a woman. Frankly speaking, it doesn’t play a role. The main thing is her active position. And by the way, it's easier for her because she’s a woman. If it was a man, he would be encouraged to be silent. But she’s a woman, she has her character. She sometimes stands up even if she is not given the floor (…) I was a member of the local parliament, and she all the time stood up and cried: " Let me talk, I want to say something!". But a man would not perhaps say like that. (…) So it depends on the position. Depends on the person's activeness, be it a woman, young or old. (…) it depends on the individual.

Civil servant, male, b. 1946

At first the interviewee denies that sex would play any role; the most important thing is that s/he has an active approach. But having said that, he states that anyhow it’s easier for a woman: she can behave in social settings in a way no man would perhaps behave. By invoking gender neutrality and hinting at the inherent sexual differences, he denies the asymmetry in the possibilities for men and women to enter public positions, and hence naturalizes gender hierarchy and differences.

**Familization and the re-negotiation of public and private**

Another discursive framework producing civic activism as a feminine sphere is the ‘*familization discourse*’. Whereas the discourse of altruistic women vs. self-seeking men takes as its starting point the character and personality, the familization discourse articulates civic activism via the concept of space. It explains women’s more active participation in civic activism by juxtaposing the public and the private spheres. The line of thinking is following: women carry the main responsibility for home, family and children, and these skills and characters (partly innate and partly acquired) make her suitable and competent for civic activism. Familization discourse thus also mostly revolves around the essentialist framework.

A man feels good when everything at home is fine. But when something bad happens… A child is healthy - everything’s ok. When a child gets ill, it’s mostly mother [who takes care of it]. Not a father. A man distances himself. (…) The same goes on in the big family that
we call society. When things are not going well, women start to run, to do, to try to take care of the family. (…) That’s why women are socially more active, because where problems arise, our help is needed, our intervention is needed, we have to make things better. The same applies to my small family as to my big family - the country. And then women, according to my understanding, are more collectivist. Men are more individualistic. They always need to be the first and foremost. But we don’t need that. We need things to be well, things to be better. (…) Woman is somehow probably initially stronger.

Feminist organization, female, b. 1952

In the excerpt above, altruistic discourse and familization are simultaneously present. The analogy of women-home-country implies that women are able to understand more deeply what the country needs.11

Familization discourse does not, however, appear only in relation to civic activism, but it is also used in relation to the state. E.g. a member of the feminist organization calls for more power for women in the state institutions by juxtaposing family and state. As women make the decisions concerning household, and family is a state in a small scale, women should be able to decide also at the state level. Another aspect in the familization of civic activism is to portray the NGO as a family. In the feminist organization, for example, two members refer to the leader of the organization as “my second mother”.

Also men explain women’s greater activity in NGOs by relying on the familization discourse:

And then, if there prevails a general instability in society, then naturally women, well in Russia it has happened so, that the family life plays an important role for women. Because of that, women decide very often all the problems that men should have decided. And decide them again - not through any official channels, but through NGOs.

Pro-Kremlin political party, male, b. 1961

So both men and women articulate the gender division in civic activism via familization, but their functions and aims are radically different. In men's interviews, the articulation of female social-political organization through home, the intimate and the feminine, is used to reproduce existing patterns of gendered agency and sexual division of labor. It is used to legitimize the current gendered division in the public sphere, and between public and private. The first interviewee interprets women to compensate in the NGOs and at home the failures that men have caused in the decision-making. He does not however question the gender hierarchy: it’s first and foremost men that are to make decisions, but when they fail, women can come and compensate. The second interviewee is even more explicit in defining sexual division of spheres. Because of women’s “biological destiny”, they are doomed to take care of the domestic sphere and of “social issues” in the public sphere.

According to my interpretation, women by contrast aim to take over civic sphere via family/home analogies.

11According to McClintoc (1995), national identity is often constructed by referring to metaphors of family and kinship. I will not be able, however, to discuss nationality here.
They make civic sphere as their legitimate area of activity and create room for agency. In other words, familization operates as a strategy for female activists to make sense and justify civic activism both for themselves and, perhaps more importantly, for others. As the men's excerpts above demonstrate, women's public agency is accepted as long as it does not question the existing gender hierarchy and division of labor. So, when women articulate their NGO activity in familization discourse and when they are perceived to perform in the public the same tasks as they perform in the private - care, nurture, upbringing – their activism is more easily accepted. It does not question the prevailing limits of women’s citizenship.

By juxtaposing private and public, female activists re-negotiate the public-private division. Familization discourse can be interpreted as a strategy to re-articulate the boundary between the spheres, to make it more fluid and blurred, enabling women to enter the public. As a matter of fact, the public-private boundary was never particularly solid in the USSR (if anywhere), but rather porous. Much of the Soviet everyday life was lived in the in the blurred landscape of the public and the private spheres, in the ‘semi-public’ (Rotkirch 2000; Temkina 1997) or 'informal public' sphere (Zdravomyslova & Voronkov 2002). Many of these semi-public spheres, such as kitchens, beauty salons and the everyday social networks for obtaining commodities, were 'femininely marked' and traditionally dominated by women (see Rotkirch 2000, 13-16, 27; Azhgikhina & Goscilo 1996; Temkina 1997). Anna Temkina (1997, 51) notes that the semi-public sphere demanded lots of skills and organizational and communication experience and it had an empowering meaning in women's lives. Temkina suggests that Soviet women took part in politics relatively little also because women could realize their interests outside of social movements and politics, in the semi-public sphere. The familization discourse implies that contemporary women’s activism could indeed build on this tradition of making things not through official state and political structures but via non-institutional channels, like NGOs. This raises an interesting question concerning the link between women's informal associations (social networks, friendship, kinship etc.) and formal association (social movements, NGOs). Women could have turned in the 1990s these informal networks into more formal ones, the Soviet semi-public into civic activism.

This kind of social-political activism, which is articulated in the familization discourse, could be interpreted as ‘social motherhood’. For example in Finland, women’s civic responsibilities and citizenship have been characterized by social mothering, which offered itself a legitimate channel for Finnish women to enter the public sphere (Sulkunen 1990&1991; Ollila 1993, quoted in Anttonen 2001, 3). Could we also characterize Russian civic activism as ‘social motherhood”? I would argue that the familization offers itself as a useful discourse for women activists for legitimizing their public activity and re-negotiating the public-private boundary, but women's NGO activism can hardly be returned only to social motherhood. Motherhood (and attributes attached to it) offers itself as a useful political identity enabling collective action, as e.g. the Committee of soldiers’ mothers show (cf. Zdravomyslova 2000). There are, however, also certain problems in framing women's activism through the metaphor of motherhood. Anu Koivunen (1998, quoted in Vuori 2001, 61) points out that motherhood metaphor can legitimize differences between women and men and among women, and simplify women’s activity.

Private and politics

There is an interesting paradox in the interviews. On the one hand, familization discourse constructs the private as a facilitator for women’s civic activism, but on the other hand, the private is perceived to be also the biggest obstacle for women’s public participation.

R.: I give an explanation about my girlfriends. In the morning they wake up, six- seven o’clock, make breakfast for their husbands. A husbands can’t for some reason cut the cutlets himself, they have to be brought to him and put to his mouth. And naturally he expects the wife to clean, to do the laundry, to iron his shirts. And if the husband is unemployed, she has to work in order to maintain him. So when could she possible participate in some women’s movement? And I don’t speak about any old women in the

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12 It has been noted in several studies that the public discussion about gender identities and relations in the 1990s has experienced a revival of patriarchal and nationalistic rhetoric, questioning the extent of women’s public activity in the labor market and politics (see e.g. Einhorn 1993; Kay 2000; Attwood 1996).
villages. They are my friends, you see, younger than me. (…) So they serve from day till
dawn their husbands. (…) I: What do you think, how to change the situation?
R: The thing is that for example in Tver’, there are much more women than men. And if
you take a look at those men that wander in the streets, firstly, they are awfully ugly and
deformed. Secondly, they are weak. And thirdly, they want to be served and spoiled to
death. (…) And I suppose my friends think that if they managed to pick to their net a more
or less reasonable, not de-formed (laugh), not a debil or suffering from down-syndrome, not
alcoholic, I think they are afraid of losing this jewel. Let him be on my neck, I can wake up
and fry the cutlets in the morning, and he won’t escape anywhere. That is, one must turn
him over to an invalid in terms of self-service, in order to make sure he won’t run away.

Feminist organization, female, b. 1972

This excerpt indicates how strong a social norm marriage and heterosexual relationship is in Russia, and it
also hints to the economic strains directed towards it. The Soviet labor market was highly gendered and
women were concentrated in the low-paid sectors. The wage level was low in general, and consequently
usually two wages were necessary for a household to manage. This meant also institutionalization of
heterosexual marriage. This Soviet legacy is very much present today, market economy only having
increased poverty and wealth differences, hence making marriage, kin and social networks ever more
important. Gender-based economic polarization manifests itself especially in the Russian middle class, where
female-dominated professions like doctors and teachers have extremely low wages. The economic
constraints thereby partly help to maintain heterosexual marriage as a norm and make women cautious to go
into a conflict over the sexual division of labor in the private. This reluctance to take up inequality within the
family can also derive from the Soviet era, when women and men were unified in their resistance in relation
to the state. This did not encourage to problematize gender relations in the private.

Men who perceive this sexual division of labor hindering women’s participation in social-political life do not
however problematize this situation. They do not suggest that the situation should be changed and that men
should be involved more in domestic responsibilities. By contrast, many women (especially feminists) voice
discontent and would like to see situation to change. This offers clearly breeding ground for feminist politics:
to politicize the private and hence re-negotiate terms of citizenship. However, not all female interviewees
perceive themselves as agents in this process. For example young women in the legal advice organization
consider the state and the legal system as the main agents in resolving this question and do not position
themselves as agents in the renegotiation over domestic responsibilities.

Interestingly enough, private was portrayed for women as a hindrance especially in relation to institutional
politics but more as a facilitator in civic activism. For men, by contrast, their role as family breadwinners
was perceived as an obstacle for participation in NGOs but not in institutional politics. How should we
interpret this contradiction that sexual division of labor restrains women’s participation in institutional
politics but not in civic activism? One explanation could be that civic activism is more flexible and it can be
more easily combined with the domestic responsibilities than institutional politics. The boundary between
civic activism and the domestic is more porous than the one between the politics and the domestic. And
perhaps precisely because of this juxtaposing of civic activism and home, men are not expected to participate
so much in civic activism.

Are women then welcomed to the institutional politics? There are three approaches as regards to it in the
interviews. The first two stands are articulated in the discourse of natural sexual difference, whereas the third
stand is articulated in the discourse of gendering cultural and social practices.

The first stand suggests that the gender-bound division in the social-political activity is a natural situation

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13 Despite women’s extensive participation in the labor market, the ideal of male breadwinner was preserved in the
USSR (Kiblitskaya 2000, 91), and the monetarization of family life in post-socialist Russia has contributed to cultivating
the ideal further (Rotkirch 2000, 250). Interestingly enough, in my interviews women’s paid work was not perceived to
inhibit women’s social-political participation.

14 Anna Temkina (1997, 155-182), having interviewed female politicians in St Petersburg, has found similar stands
concerning gender and politics.
and hence there is no desire to radically change it. Women can be incorporated in the politics only in a very limited way: to take care of social issues, to function as a "reconciling buffer" between men or as the President’s wife. Women are thereby welcomed to institutional politics indeed because of the very same “feminine qualities” that were characteristic of them in NGOs.

The second stand sees that precisely because of these "feminine qualities" women should be more involved in politics.

Men are brawlers. For them to fight is a pleasure. (…) And I think that a woman in society has to smother this horrible, foul aggression. Because she suffers from it. (…) And when women are let to enter even a little bit to the decision-making level: “Guys, don’t! Let’s find another way. Let’s meet, let’s reconcile.”

Feminist organization, female, b. 1952

Women are welcomed to politics, because they can complement men: women compromise, function as a peacemaker and clamp down male aggressiveness. Women are thus offered a role of exercising control over men, to be ‘culture over nature’. This representation of women as controlling and disciplining agents is a continuation from the Soviet system (cf. earlier mentioned obshchestvennitsa-movement), which also treated women as performing social control over men.

The third stand is a non-essentialist, challenging stand. The gender-bound hierarchy in public and private spheres is acknowledged as an outcome of gendering practices, it is deemed unfair and there is an aspiration for changing it. This is perceived to happen e.g. by breaking the traditional gender-based division in politics (women dealing with social-politics) and by putting under question the whole concept of politics (NGOs defined also as political activity). I now turn to explore these anti-essentialist explanations more in detail.

**Challenging Discourses: Culture and Structures**

There are also such explanatory frameworks in the interviews, which challenge the essentialist postulates, albeit they are in minority. They try to grasp the dynamics of gender-bound asymmetry in the social-political participation (i.e. women as practitioners and men as leaders; women more in civil society and men more in high politics) by drawing from historical, cultural and social factors. Thus, civil society is not defined feminine as such, but it is pondered upon, if women are more active in NGOs because of the gendering practices in Russian society. The discursive framework of cultural and social practices approaches gender aspects of social-political participation mainly by pondering upon hindrances for women's participation.

What are then the cultural and social factors offered as explanations for gender-based divisions in the social-political activity? Firstly, the demographic situation in Russia is perceived to influence. There are more women in Russia, as the result of wars and of men’s lower life expectancy rate compared to women. This may cause that women are more active in civil society. Secondly, Russian masculine culture, perceived as an outcome of a long historical process and having been institutionalized in the Soviet Communist party, is considered to inhibit women’s political participation. There prevails negative gender stereotypes concerning women politicians and men and women are perceived in general to be subject to different and rather rigid role-expectations.

A third factor inhibiting women’s social-political participation is perceived to be women’s low level of political consciousness. Women are portrayed as “underdeveloped men”, who are not yet ready or competent enough to enter institutional politics, because of lack of participation traditions and training. Occasionally an elitist point of view is put forth; e.g. one female activist said: “There cannot be many activists in the Russian women’s movement at the moment, because the current problems can be understood and decided only by professional, educated women”.15

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15 Not only the Russian women’s movement but NGOs in general seem to be very much in the hands of the emerging middle class. Obviously class is an important distinction in civil society, which has to be analyzed more.
Finally, lack of financial resources was mentioned to block women’s way to politics. In contemporary Russia, political and economic power are tightly intertwined, which contributes to the masculine dominance in the formal political sphere. Consequently, women rarely hold such material resources which would enable them to organize effective political campaigns. Civil society is more accessible to women than the institutional political sphere, because it does not require extensive material resources or influential connections. However, there are also a few examples in my material of female NGO activists who have run as candidates in local elections. Hence, civic activism can open ways for institutional politics.

**Whose civil society?**

So far I have examined the discursive level, but how do the discourses translate to practices? If civic activism is discursively constructed as feminine, does it mean that women also form the overwhelming majority of the membership in NGOs and men in the institutional politics?

After the abolishment of the quota system in 1991, women’s representation in Russian parliamentary system has decreased significantly. At the moment only 8% of the deputies in Duma (the Federal Parliament) and 10% of the deputies in the regional parliaments are women (Zhenshchiny i muzhchiny Rossii 2000), compared to around 30% in the USSR. The situation in the sphere of civic activism is, however, more unclear. Sperling (1999) and Kay (2000) show that whereas women's representation in the formal politics has dropped, women have established a lot of different NGOs. James Richter (2000; 2003) assumes women to be disproportionately active in Russian NGO sector and Julia Zelikova’s small survey (1996) shows that over 80% of the members of St Petersburg charitable organizations are women. According to V.N. Jakimets (2002), the majority of Russian NGOs are active in the following areas: social support to the vulnerable groups (children, homeless etc.), human rights protection, enlightenment and education, culture, social work and service provision. These are indeed traditionally feminine, “social motherhood” sectors. However, although there are indications that civic activism is a female-dominated sphere, a convincing empirical evidence about the overall gender (and class, age and ethnicity etc.) composition in civil society is still lacking.16

There have occurred major changes in Russian civil society both at the institutional and discursive level in the 1990s. I suggest that the attribution of civic activism with femininity is partly produced by discursive changes in conceptualizing civil society, its aims, boundaries and functions. Civil society was a key slogan during the political mobilization in the end of eighties and the beginning of the nineties. Civil society was defined through its political dimension; it referred to NGOs and social movements, which would function independently and autonomously of the state structures (Zdravomyslova 1996, 17-23). This political mobilization was not however anything particularly 'femininely marked' - actually on the contrary. The democratic movement was mainly led by men, coming especially from the dissident circles (see e.g. Urban et al. 1997, 95-118), where also prevailed quite conventional gender relations and sexual division of labor (see Chuikina 1996). Indeed, one can assume that precisely because of this political character of the democratic movement, women and femininity did not appear in the centre of this movement. However, women were also engaged in the democratic movement, e.g. through the Russian women's movement.

In the second half of the 1990s, the concept of civil society became a more professional and less an ideological concept (Zdravomyslova 1996). Pursiainen and Patomäki (2002), having analyzed civil society debate in Russia, sketch a discursive change from more liberal towards more authoritarian stands during the 1990s. During the political mobilization, civil society was defined as free associations defending society against the repressive state. In the beginning of the 1990s there emerged a "neo-liberal " discourse, conceptualizing civil society as a 'third sector', taking over social responsibilities from the state.17 In the late

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16 In connection to my research, I will conduct a survey in NGOs in Tver’, in order to receive statistical data about these various distinctions in the NGO field.

17 Richter (2000, 2) defines 'third sector' as a formal, functionally differentiated and frequently professional non-profit organizations that interact with the state and market actors. According to Pursiainen (2000, 20), the third sector model
1990s, in the aftermath of the disappointment in the expectations of market reform and democracy, a discourse based on an idea of a strong paternalistic and harmonizing state and formal procedural democracy with a third-sector like civil society mobilizing the society to help the state gained a hegemonic position. Thus, there is a tendency from a "civil society against the state" position towards a "civil society within the state" position (cf. also Brygalina & Temkina 2003; Jakimets 2001). The conceptualization of civic sphere as a third sector has also been facilitated by the vast social problems and poverty prevailing in Russia today. The role of the state, which provided social services to citizens during the Soviet times, has significantly declined. Many NGOs have been established directly as responses to these social welfare problems (Richter 2000; Sperling 1999; Jakimets 2002).

On the basis of this we can suggest that discursive change from 'civil society against the state' to the 'third sector partnership with the state' goes hand in hand with the production of civic activism as a feminine sphere. The idea of civil society as a third sector and as social partnership entails also a discursive change from 'political' and 'masculine' to 'social' and 'feminine'. This implies the re-negotiation of women's citizenship: it establishes again, but in a new way, the Soviet hierarchical partnership between the state and women. In the USSR, the state was the ally of mothers; now the state is the partner, obviously not an equal one, of ‘social mothers’, i.e. female NGO activists. The civic sphere has turned into a sphere of care, women bearing there the social costs of the social transformation.

Conclusion

We can conclude that political agency and citizenship are clearly gendered in post-socialist Russia. There are two discursive frameworks making sense gender differences in the context of social-political organization: the discourse of natural sexual difference and the discourse of gendering social and cultural practices. The discourse of natural sexual difference produces civic activism as feminine and institutional politics as masculine, and this division is quite clearly demarcated. Both femininity and masculinity, and civic activism and institutional politics are perceived as complementary, constructed in relation to each other. The discourse of natural sexual difference manifests itself in three more limited discourses: the discourse of altruistic women vs. self-interested men, the demasculinization discourse and the familization discourse. By contrast, the discourse of gendering social and cultural practices questions the essentialist postulates of the discourse of natural sexual difference, and approaches gender differences as socially constructed and maintained.

I have collected in the following table the meanings attributed to civic activism/femininity and institutional politics/masculinity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil society/Femininity</th>
<th>Institutional politics/Masculinity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actors’ characteristics, qualities and interests</strong></td>
<td><strong>Actors’ characteristics, qualities and interests</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-sacrifice</td>
<td>- Self-interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Persistence, patience</td>
<td>- Quick victories with low costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Collective</td>
<td>- Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Social</td>
<td>- Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Morality</td>
<td>- Immorality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Compassion</td>
<td>- Toughness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Peacefulness, solidarity</td>
<td>- Aggressiveness, belligerent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Emotion</td>
<td>- Reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functions, structures</strong></td>
<td><strong>Functions, structures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘Common good’, responsibility for humankind and future generations</td>
<td>- Pursuing career and position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Care</td>
<td>- Decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- No big material resources and benefits</td>
<td>- Big material resources and revenues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Non-authoritarian structure</td>
<td>- Authoritarian, vertical power structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

conceptualizes civil society as one taking care of those tasks that neither the state nor nor the market can or are willing to deal with.
- More freedom in self-expression
- Enterprising
- Non-conventional, unofficial
- Home, domestic, everyday life
- No prestige
- Control
- Sociability, communication
- Non-profit
- Equality and pluralism
- Clean

- Limited space for self-expression
- To maintain status quo
- Stable, conventional
- State, administration
- Prestige
- Corruption
- Power, political game
- Commercial, business
- Hierarchy and non-pluralism
- Dirty

This prevailing gendered political agency testifies for the need to analyze the diversities in the public sphere. For example Gal (1997) analyzing Eastern Europe and Arnot et al. (2000) analyzing EU countries suggest that the public sphere, which they conceptualize as elections, political parties and public decision-making positions, is clearly associated with masculinity. While this is certainly true regarding the foregoing institutional settings, it is not so regarding the sphere of civil society in the light of my study. Therefore we need more nuanced and detailed analysis about the gender divisions within the public sphere and to conceptualize the public sphere as consisting of multiple ‘publics’. Recognizing the diversity of social-political activities and arenas within the public sphere is essential in order not to implicitly reproduce the idea of traditional institutional politics as the only ‘real’ public sphere and not to render civic activism invisible.

Although essentialist discourses dominate in my interview material, there can be read also resistance for it. First, there are challenging discourses drawing from structural and cultural explanations, and secondly, the hesitation in explaining gender differences shows that the definitions of gender identities and relations are not monolithic but to some degree open for re-definition. This, and the problematization of the sexual division of labor, open perspectives to politicize gender.

Thirdly, defining civic activism as feminine and portraying women as altruistic and morally superior can operate as a re-coding strategy, as ‘strategic essentialism’, in a social climate, which is relatively hostile to ‘emancipation’ and ‘gender equality’. Female activists explicitly raise these femininely marked characteristics to justify their public activity. They celebrate female agency and persistence. They emphasize sexual difference somewhat similar vein as (western) gynocentric feminism. This way they can try to protect civic sphere for themselves and to strengthen women’s influence, which is experienced limited in the other sectors of the public sphere. Discourse of natural sexual difference offers itself at this moment as a useful strategy for female activists to frame their activities so that they can claim legitimacy for their public activity, but without radically questioning the prevailing gender ideology.

This re-coding strategy can, however, be also problematic. As postmodern feminist critique has pointed out, the gynocentric aim of celebrating and emphasizing ‘genuine femininity’ is based upon an a-historical idea of femininity that is supposedly common to all women. Hence, it runs the danger of reinforcing the very same gender hierarchy it tries to overcome in the first place. Further, it tends to ignore the differences between women. The reproduction of and praising the idea of women’s moral superiority and altruism in the civic sphere can end up serving as a strategy to exclude women from the formal political sphere and economic power.

The gender-based division in social-political organization implies that women’s and men’s political citizenship, the ways and spaces of practicing citizenship, are indeed differently constructed. Women’s citizenship is connected to family and civil society (and paid work, although it was not explicitly pondered upon in the interviews), but not to institutional politics and the state. Men’s citizenship is by contrast connected to institutional politics, paid work (male breadwinner model), but not to the private sphere and civic activism. This implies gendered civic virtues and duties: women taking responsibility for the future generations, for saving the planet and transmitting new civic culture as NGO activists and mothers; men as women’s objects of care, and as political and economic leaders, decision-makers and breadwinners. Perhaps this implies that men’s citizen duties are towards the family and the state (breadwinner and political leader).
and women’s towards the family and the nation (biological and ideological reproducers of nation)?

What has then changed in Russia in terms of gender, civil society and citizenship? We can discern many continuities from the Soviet system, like the representations of women as exercising control over men and of female altruism and morality, association of masculinity with power and institutional politics, reliance on the discourse of “natural sexual difference” and the fluidity of public-private boundary. There are certainly also discontinuities in relation to the Soviet past, like the emergence of independent civic activism and the possibilities to publicly reflect gender relations and terms of citizenship (who can participate, where and in which ways). Many phenomena are as well combinations of new and old, like the relationship between the state and women (In the USSR state as an ally of mothers; now a partner of 'social mothers') and the characters of civic activism (In the USSR informal activities in the semi-public sphere traditionally dominated by women; now more formal civil society associated with femininity).

If civic activism is conceptualized as a sphere of female care, altruism and self-sacrifice, how is it then 'political'? According to my interpretation, through civic activism actors can question and challenge (although of course also reproduce) the prevailing ways to structure social relations, and put forth competing discourses and courses of action. At the moment, amidst of economic problems, in the social climate which is not particularly sensitive to issues of gender and when institutional politics lacks credibility, civil society offers a more flexible, open and accessible space for women (and perhaps also for men) to participate in the public and to rework the individual-state relations and gender identities. An interesting question arising here is the relationship between the 'feminine civil society' and the 'masculine politics and state': how do they encounter and interact and under which conditions?

References:


Author:

M.Soc.Sc. Suvi Salmenniemi
Department of Sociology and the Centre for Russian and East European Studies
P.O.Box 4, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland
suvi.salmenniemi@helsinki.fi