

RESEARCH REPORT IREX STG

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The Women's Movement and Violence Against Women in Russia and Armenia

From May 21 until July 9, 2002, I was completing fieldwork supported by IREX on women's organizations in post-Soviet states designed to address violence against women. Based in Moscow, I traveled to St. Petersburg for a conference on "women and civil society," to Yerevan, Armenia to give a lecture at the American University of Armenia, and to Barnaul, Russia to investigate a new Russian fieldsite. In brief, this research trip allowed me to bolster the findings in my dissertation so that I can finish my book manuscript and to add a detailed case study of Armenian organizations to two articles comparing domestic violence policy and women's movement development in post-Soviet states. I was fortunate to discover that one of the processes that I had been observing for five years in Russia, the naming of the problem of domestic violence, had come to fruition. While Russia women's organizations still face tremendous obstacles to getting effective policies implemented, over the course of the last few years domestic violence has gone from being a completely hidden problem, so hidden that there was no name for the phenomenon, to a problem with a name. The same is not true in Armenia.

Summary of approach and research methodology

As this project followed up on earlier dissertation research conducted in 1997 and 1999, I built upon my previous contacts. Following the procedures of prior Western scholars of women's organizations in Russia, such as Racioppi and See (1997) and Valerie Sperling (1999), in 1997, I had started with the larger, more established, more centrally located women's organizations and work out through their networks and contacts. On this last trip, I followed up with the following Moscow-based women's organizations who focus (at least partially) on violence against women: *Syostr* (Sisters), ANNA, Yaroslavna, Russian Association of Crisis Centers for Women, and Moscow Center for Gender Studies in Moscow. In addition, I spoke with representatives from ABA-CEELI which has a gender program, Internews which had crafted a anti-domestic violence campaign with ANNA, and IREX-Russia which had distributed USAID small grants to crisis centers, and USAID. I also added two new research sites: Barnaul, Russia and Yerevan, Armenia. In Barnaul, I was able to connect with *Otklik* (Response), Women's Alliance, Siberian Initiative, and Altai Krai Crisis Center for Men. In Yerevan, I had interviews with individuals from these organizations: ABA-CEELI, the International Bar Union who has had domestic violence cases, and the Women's Rights Center which focus on violence against women.

My on-site research method is participant observation, a blend of political science zeal for dispassionate observation of politics with anthropology's ethnography. In practice, this means that in addition to collecting materials from the organizations and conducting interviews with directors and volunteers, I attend conferences, roundtables, parliamentary hearings, and press conferences, hold informal conversations with activists, and offer my services – such as translation – for the organizations. Besides interviews and informal conversations, for example, I had the opportunity on this trip to participate in a roundtable on crisis centers for women during a conference on "Woman and Civil Society" at Philosophy Faculty, St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg, Russia. I also attended a roundtable on men's reproductive health at the Altai Crisis

Center for Men in Barnaul. In addition to participant observation, I consulted with local experts on women's rights and violence against women, such as scholars at the American University in Armenia, the Moscow Center for Gender Studies, and IMEMO (Institute of World Economy and International Relations).

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

One key finding on this trip is that the women's organizations, which first arose in Russia in the early to mid 1990s, have grown into a small crisis center social movement, from a handful in 1997 to perhaps 120.¹ In addition to providing necessary psychological and legal help to victims of domestic and sexual violence, crisis centers have begun to work with local officials – such as mayors and leaders in the Ministries of Social Protection and Internal Affairs – challenging them to be more accountable to Russian citizens. Overcoming obstacles, an umbrella organization, the Russian Association of Crisis Centers for Women, has emerged (and has been re-organized) to link together these organizations. In contrast, there are only two organization in Armenia clearly committed to violence against women.

What appears to be crucial to facilitating the development of crisis center organizations and movements is the combination of targeted foreign assistance and domestic feminism. The first crisis centers in Russia emerged with limited foreign assistance, inspired by the experiences of Russian women, the thinking of Russian feminist theorists, and foreign activists. The proliferation of crisis centers was facilitated by targeted funding following the 1995 Beijing UN Conference on Women. For example, between 1999 and April 2002, USAID distributed (through IREX-Russia) \$600,000 in small grants to crisis centers across Russia. Such financial assistance has only recently and less extensively appeared in Armenia.

The key obstruction to the (further) development of a crisis center movement is a closed political system. I found that women's groups remain quite isolated from politicians, especially those in Moscow and Yerevan. In Russia, even the process of registration (and re-registration) with the Justice Department as non-government organization is difficult. For example, organizations are often prohibited from using terms such as "feminist" or "Russian."

The second key findings is that "domestic violence" (*domashnee nasilie* or *nasilie v sem'e*) is now a term that is understandable in Russian to many Russians. Because of the development of these women's crisis centers in Russia and their publicity campaigns, there has been a qualitative shift in the perception that the problem of domestic violence exists. For example, the language is being employed by some politicians, especially in the regions, and being used on TV talk shows. While problems can be addressed without names, e.g. as unintended consequences of unrelated policies, naming a problem is the first step in coming up with policies which specifically target and address a problem.

Relevance and contribution to field

This research speaks to social movement theory, such as that of Sidney Tarrow, highlighting what Tarrow calls the "political opportunity structure," as well as to women's movement theory, which is coming to terms with the role of foreign funding and the NGOization of the international women's movement. Second, my recent research speaks to the growing subfield of feminist comparative policy that brings gender studies' critique of gender neutrality to comparative political science and public policy.² In the future, I would like to see the following research projects:

¹ This estimate was made by Marina Regentova of the Russian Association of Crisis Centers for Women. Forty of these are members of the Association.

² A good overview is given by Amy Mazur (1999) "Feminist comparative policy: A new field of study," *European Journal of Political Research* 35: 483-506.

1. a detailed analysis of the criminal system response to domestic violence in Russia and Armenia. Currently, the federal governments are not collecting crime statistics which record the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim. Human Rights Watch (1997 and 1999) and Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights (2000) began this analysis, but there needs to more systematic evidence collection and a more thorough analysis of the law enforcement practices and cultures.
2. a detailed analysis of the phone calls being made to crisis centers across Russia and Armenia. To date, the crisis centers have been collecting different information in different way, making aggregation practically impossible. According to the staff of the Russian Association of Crisis Centers for Women, this is going to change.
3. survey research on post-Soviet citizens understanding of the Russian equivalents of such terms such as domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment.

Policy significance and recommendations

In addition to speaking to the scholarly community, my research speaks directly to the policy community. Violence against women is a significant policy issue identified by the international community as a violation of women's rights. While there are few nation-wide statistics, the number of phone calls and visits to crisis centers over the last few years in Russia demonstrates that domestic and sexual violence are not uncommon. The stories that women tell are of large-scale indifference on behalf of law enforcement personnel. Perversely, one of the recent reforms in Russia, the new criminal procedural code, while mostly progressive, may restrict crisis centers from participation in social advocacy of victims in court and further complicate evidence collection from alleged rapists.³ Based on my research I would like to recommend:

- *keep funding crisis centers for women in post-Soviet states*

As affirmed by Inna Lukavenko, the USAID-Moscow staff member who is in charge of USAID/Russia's NGO programs, the people involved with the women's crisis centers are the most committed NGO staff in Russia. They are providing needed services and challenging the government to be more democratic. The USAID program has been terminated, leaving many excellent crisis centers with unclear prospects.

- *re-consider NGO funding fads, especially the current fad of "sexual trafficking"*

While sex trafficking is a serious problem which needs to be addressed, I worry that it is being funded to the detriment of funding crisis center work on sexual and domestic violence. I also wonder whether crisis centers, or NGOs more broadly, are the best avenue for real change for this international-mafiya related problem. Further, while most crisis centers are now quietly advising women on sex trafficking through their hotlines, they put themselves at risk when they publicize their work, a risk that funding agencies are unwilling to take. Several crisis centers which have publicized their sex trafficking work have received threatening phone calls.

³ As in the US, rape victims are often presumed guilty while alleged rapists are often granted an undeservedly robust presumption of innocence. Thus, strengthening the presumption of innocence may shift more responsibility for proving guilt to the rape victims.

- *continue pushing for the Russian government to be more open to non-governmental organizations*