



# Gender's crooked path: Feminism confronts Russian patriarchy

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## Abstract

In this article we discuss the uneasy development of gender studies in Russia as one example of public sociology. For empirical evidence we concentrate mainly on our own experience in the Gender Studies Program at the European University in St. Petersburg, but we also refer to the other cases. We observe how the political and academic context of the 1990s created opportunities for academic innovations that ideologically challenged Soviet patriarchy and invoked gendered criticisms of post-Soviet changes. We discuss the effects of the rapid but partial institutionalization of gender studies in the Russian academic context and how gender became the umbrella term for both feminist and anti-feminist standpoints. We claim that since international support for the gender studies diminished in the 2000s, the fashion and economic benefit of doing gender studies has declined, with only a small group of researchers maintaining their commitment to the feminist approach to gender. We focus on the politicization of gender in the last decade of Putin's Russia and the role of feminist researchers in the analysis of the new conservatism, expressed in gender ideology. We examine the problems of combining public expertise and academic work in the particular realm of gender politics.

## Keywords

Gender studies, patriarchy, politics, public sociology, Russia

We started conducting gender studies in the 1990s. Our interest resulted from the confluence of our professional careers and the political and institutional environment. In

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this article, we explain what ‘doing gender studies’ means in the Russian context, highlighting the dilemmas we faced. In an earlier publication (Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2002) we presented a comprehensive overview of gender studies undertaken by the Russian Academy of Sciences. Here we will focus on our own professional and public experience.

We treat gender studies as feminist social studies, recognizing its interdisciplinary character and political orientation. It is social knowledge driven by an agenda and closely related to public sociology as we understand it (Burawoy, 2008). The public meaning of gender sociology is bound up with the category of gender, which entails an analysis of the social organization of gender differences, focused on issues of power and inequality.

## The ‘discovery’ of gender and professional identity

Prior to our engagement with feminist studies we were already well into our professional careers. In Russia, the career of a sociologist – and not only of a sociologist – is heavily dependent on the political context. We entered sociology during the Soviet period, when the discipline was a servant of power and therefore not an autonomous academic discipline. It was controlled by the ideological apparatuses of the party-state (Firsov, 2012).

In the late Soviet period, the initial reformist impulse within sociology – similar to that which had motivated sociologists during the period of the thaw in the 1960s – was repressed. Sociology was still only partially institutionalized. Courses in sociology were taught as electives in various social science departments, and sociology did not have its own PhD program. On the other hand, the Soviet Sociological Association already existed as a collective member of the International Sociological Association; the Institute of Applied Social Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences carried out various government projects; and the Institute of Social and Economic Problems of the USSR Academy of Sciences was established in 1975 in Leningrad with its own department of sociology. It was here that we began our careers.

Perestroika created all sorts of opportunities for Russian sociology. All of a sudden, from justifying the regime, sociology began to play an indispensable and meaningful role in criticizing the regime and supporting democratic reforms. It became clear to us that sociology and democratic reforms would advance hand in hand. The possibilities of institutionalizing sociology were directly related to the political regime. Without the consolidation of democracy and civil society, empirical sociology as a professional enterprise could not survive.

At the end of 1980s, both of us began to study social movements. This was an area in which field studies and action methodologies, both novel for the Russian academic scene, played an important role. Anna Temkina studied the workers movement; she participated in Leonid Gordon’s project in the Donbass, exploring how and why miners strike. Elena Zdravomyslova studied theories of social movements. This was a time when western researchers took advantage of opportunities to study Russia in transition, while Russian scholars were able to advance their academic knowledge through international contacts made through exchange programs and joint research. During the early 1990s, both of us participated in the US exchange programs of IREX; the subject

of our advanced training was the sociology of social movements. We had the opportunity to discuss many issues with our foreign colleagues both at home and abroad, but one issue in particular kept rearing its head, namely: the issue of gender relations in Russia – everyday sexism and feminism.

Almost every western researcher whom we met abroad or in Russia, irrespective of gender, was curious about Russian gender practices with their mix of formal equality, female emancipation and women managing the family, on the one hand – and sexism, the absence of male responsibilities in the household and a symbolic patriarchy, on the other. It was this ‘perspective from outside’ that forced us to question our own gender stereotypes, which we had imbibed in the course of socialization. Apart from that, through our contacts with the international academy, we discovered institutionalized feminist research, centers for women and gender studies and academic feminists – feminists who studied gender inequalities based on philosophical premises that were virtually unknown to us.

To a large degree, the literature on social movements – to the extent that it deals with women’s movements – focuses on second-wave feminism. While trying to grasp the Russian transformation through the lens of social movements, time and again we asked the challenging question: why was democratic mobilization in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space not accompanied by a feminist mobilization? Why had sexual harassment, domestic violence, gender discrimination in job-hiring policies and poor representation of women in politics – themes that were legitimate in other academic areas – been ignored and even treated as irrelevant by Russian researchers? Did it mean that such phenomena did not exist? No, this was not true. Why, then, would the very term ‘feminism’ be thought of as abusive? The answers to these questions did not emerge immediately or with any clear finality. However, it was in this context that we began to identify ourselves as feminists and became ready to make a commitment to gender studies as a new agenda for academic research. In other words, it was an academic interest that led us down the path of feminist theory and gender studies.

However, we – and our colleagues – considered gender studies not only an academic field but also a platform for feminist education. We wanted our studies to have an effect on public consciousness and contribute to a feminist agenda, relevant to Russian society with its unique gender order influenced by the Soviet policies of repression and gender mobilization (see also Zdravomyslova, 2013).

To summarize: we were led to gender studies through our sociological background, our professional interest in collective mobilization, our participation in social movements and our increased reflexivity as it intersected with our western experience. This led to the discovery of gender studies as a new field of knowledge and our attempt to apply it to the Russian context.

## **Dilemmas of the ‘gender-flavored’ 1990s<sup>1</sup>**

Upon returning from our brief but intense academic exchange program abroad, our attention was drawn to the fragmented feminist mobilization that had appeared in what was still a weak – but nonetheless significant – civil society. New feminist initiatives had emerged in the twilight of Perestroika’s mobilization. Some of those initiatives were

born in academia, but they also embraced civic activism. For example, the Moscow feminist group LOTOS included several feminist researchers. Gender emergency centers and groups organized against domestic violence were established. These were small-scale and hardly noticeable, but we were aware of them, shared their agenda and joined their actions when we could. One of the authors of this article attended the Second All-Russia Forum of Women's NGOs in 1992.<sup>2</sup> It was organized by Russian activists and supported by international feminist organizations, which were investing in the development of the gender agenda in Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries. In all these events, gender and feministic education had an important role.

### *The rise of gender studies*

As international assistance increased, the membership of research institutes and NGOs began to overlap, reflecting a habitus shared by academic feminists and their partners in civil society. We were educated women oriented to developing our professional careers; we had experience of democratic civic activism during the Perestroika period; we had experience in international academic and activist networks; we had experienced gender discrimination ourselves or had observed it, but earlier had not viewed it as discriminatory; we had liberal and pro-western values; and we believed in the importance of public intellectuals in the democratization of society.

Academic feminists in the CIS became more active in the 1990s. Some of them initiated new educational programs and seminars; others launched new gender centers in colleges and registered them as NGOs. To name a few that were important for us: the Moscow Center for Gender Studies in the Institute of Demography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Rimashevskaya, Posadskaya, Voronina, Kochkina), Centers for Gender Studies at Tver' (Uspenskaya, Kozlova), Samara (Popkova, Tartakovskaya), Kharkov (Ukraine: Irina and Sergei Zhrebkins) and Minsk (Belarus: Gapova, Usmanova). To this day we have been collaborating with them.

The Russian academic authorities looked favorably on these innovations. But, why? There were two sets of reasons, one to do with politics and the other to do with the economy.

During the Yeltsin period, Russia was seeking integration into international politics. In 1995, the Russian Federation signed a Declaration against all forms of sexual violence and against discrimination against women. In this context, there was support for education and research as well as corresponding organizations that complied with this agenda. The second set of reasons for the favorable disposition toward gender studies was the sorry state of the budget in the Russian academy, which had lost a substantial share of its government support. This encouraged the administrations of universities and academic institutes to support new internal projects that promised to bring in grants. In this way, they hoped to salvage their entire institutions. By complying with international standards, the creation of centers for gender studies gave their institutions a renovated look. So, the new gender centers led to an influx of international funding for projects and thereby helped the academy to survive. In these ways, the political and economic situation encouraged entrepreneurship in academia, including gender studies, and feminists researchers, although very few at the time, used it for their benefit.

Hence, an academic innovation that had developed in the context of civic mobilization, in the form of gender studies, created a window of institutional opportunity. Crafty entrepreneurial imitators and amateur researchers snuck in through the window behind the academic feminists. However, the key gender objectives that we set for ourselves were not purely academic but included goals that were openly political – to facilitate gender equality and gender freedoms and to fight against sexism. A significant part of our agenda was gender education both for academics and for wider publics.

The gender perspective was totally novel for the Russian academy, so everything had to be done from scratch. It was an unplowed field with no division of labor. Therefore, during the 1990s we had to do a little of everything, including translations, interpretations of theoretical writings that were new to us, elaboration of the conceptual apparatus and research directives, public education and linking empirical research with activism. Research in this new field required a lot of skill and knowledge and, of course, required active collaboration with the international research community.

This is the story of how one of us was drawn into the feminist tide. In 1993, four of Elena Zdravomyslova's sociology students at St. Petersburg University asked her to teach an extra-curricular course on feminist theory. They were eager to obtain this new knowledge, having heard about it somehow somewhere, but the department's course offerings included nothing even close to this topic. Elena took up the challenge, and every two or three weeks she and her students met in her kitchen. It was feminist self-education in the form of a kitchen seminar outside any institutional arrangement.

Discussions among St. Petersburg's feminists also contributed to the development of gender studies. Olga Lipovskaya and a group of colleagues opened St. Petersburg's Center for Gender Issues. Feminist education was an essential part of its activity: seminars, consciousness-raising groups and research projects (on topics such as women without jobs and sexual harassment at work). We academics were needed as lecturers, researchers, commentators and participants in their events outside the academy.

At this time, there emerged a movement of summer schools devoted to gender, sponsored by international foundations. These schools took place in Russia and other post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Lithuania and became the platform for gender education and the consolidation of an interdisciplinary gender community consisting of a small number of academic feminists. In this connection, new universities, specifically the Central European University and later the European Humanities University that initially operated in Minsk, but because of Lukashenko's political regime had to move to Vilnius, played a major role.

It was out of this broth that our feminist commitment was born and our feminist theory and gender research developed. At that time, we wrote a lot about the specifics of the emerging field of women's studies in Russia as compared with the West and about the role of the women's movement in the development of feminist theory and sociology. First and foremost, we were interested in the sociological branch of gender studies. Analyzing Russian gender relations, we developed our own understanding of terms such as 'gender order,' 'gender regime,' 'gender approach,' and later the idea of 'intersectionality' in gender studies.

### *International collaborations*

Meanwhile, the academy was going through institutional changes. The 1990s created a demand for new knowledge, resulting in new research and educational entities, such as the Center for Independent Social Research (1992) and later the European University in St. Petersburg (1996). At the Center for Independent Social Research, we regularly participated in international projects. Due to the geographic proximity between St. Petersburg and Finland, we developed a close collaboration with Finnish sociologists. Initially, these projects were aimed at studying only social movements. The entire world was interested in the post-Soviet transformations, but participation in international projects was the only reliable way of discovering what was really happening. It became an open field. Anna Rotkirch, a sociologist and feminist, became the key figure in this collaboration. Together, we conducted a number of projects related to gender relations in Russia. In collaboration with Rotkirch and her colleagues Elina Haavio-Mannila and JP Roos, we undertook studies of sexual biographies and the 'new household,' both framed from a gender perspective. These joint projects with Finnish sociologists were very successful thanks to our convergent worldviews, our friendly relations and the collegiality that emerged as we carried out the projects.

It was important that from the very beginning we worked together. Our 'academic duo' was and still is expressed in co-authorship of publications as well as in collaboration on projects, teaching and educational outreach. This mutual support, including human relations, helped to promote the new field that, despite many obstacles, found its place in the academy.

It was important that we were not alone. The networks of cooperation linked the gender centers in Tver', Samara, Moscow, Minsk and Kharkov as well as individual researchers who did not belong to these centers but worked from the same perspective. We regularly organized conferences and meetings, participated in summer schools and conducted joint projects. If we were to respond to the needs and requests of the community of academic feminists and civic activists, it was imperative that we held similar views, pursued common interests and goals and continually supported each other.

One of the most significant academic innovations was the opening of the European University in St. Petersburg in 1996. Its first rector, sociologist Boris Firsov, offered us jobs there. Gender studies found a supportive home in this fast developing university that was committed to the advance of modern academic knowledge. For several years, we gave courses on feminist theory and the specifics of Russian gender relations. Although these courses were optional, they always appealed to the interests of students – and not just women. At the time, interest in the subject grew among young researchers, first, because this was a new, progressive subject and, second, because this subject resonated with the many existential problems young people faced.

During the 1990s, international foundations were very active in Russia, providing grants to explore new academic areas including gender studies. In the beginning, grants from international foundations were the only source of funding at the European University. Since we had a record of academic initiatives that stretched over several years, we qualified for institutional grants from the MacArthur and Ford Foundations to develop the program of gender studies in the Departments of Political Science and

Sociology. This funding continued until 2009. These foundations also supported the gender studies networks. In addition, we received individual grants from the Open Society Foundation and the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Thus, the resources of feminist camaraderie, solidarity with western and Russian colleagues, institutional support from the European University and financial support from foundations made it possible for us to introduce gender studies into the European University in St. Petersburg.

### *Public sociology in the context of patriarchy*

What has this brief overview of how we ‘discovered gender’ to do with public sociology? We repeat our earlier claim that public sociology is contextual. During the 1990s, a fragile academic feminism became a civic initiative. Gender researchers worked with NGOs, created networks and promoted institutional and ideological innovations in academia and beyond. In truth, gender research was public sociology in the 1990s, or more precisely, public interdisciplinary transnational studies. Gender studies did, indeed, cross borders, and later they would be attacked for being divorced from their context, being alien to Russia and having a western orientation. Although they would later be accused of being separated from activism, academic feminists interacted with publics, recruiting young people, activists and representatives of various disciplines and professions (for example, during summer schools) as well as appearing in the mass media.

Gender researchers were able to project gender categories and feminist themes into public discourse. Having been previously treated as a foreign word, now, slowly but surely, feminism – and with it the feminist agenda – reached the public. In a fragmentary way, it also appeared in the Russian media. All this took place due to pressure from the international community, local academic feminists and civic activists.

Here is a list of issues that our colleagues and we studied: the balance between work and family, discrimination in the workplace, sexual harassment, under-representation of women in politics, the gender profile of employment, the prevalence of abortion, the lack of sexual education, problems of sexual minorities, the lack of care and the shortage of care workers. We tried to analyze all these issues by paying attention to the specific gender dynamics of Russia, the consequences of Soviet gender policies and the impact of post-Soviet transformations on the gender order. We introduced such terms as ‘state patriarchy,’ ‘etacratric gender order’<sup>3</sup> and the contract of the ‘working mother.’ The term ‘patriarchal renaissance’ was discussed by Posadskaya, Rimashevskaya and others (see Posadskaya, 1993; Zakharova et al., 1989). However, the broad public was not very interested in these issues. The reaction to the Soviet legacy and its patriarchal model turned traditional patriarchy, with its naturalization of gender roles, into an appealing alternative to the Soviet notions of masculinity and femininity and its hypocritical policy of gender equality. Ideologies of gender equality and gender freedom seemed ever more out of place as the rhetoric of getting back to national traditions infiltrated public discourse and set the terms of choice.

It is a challenge to cultivate gender studies in an atmosphere of patriarchal discourse, which rightly considered gender studies a threat to gender hierarchies. Gender sensitivity in the public remained very limited. It required nurturing, which we did as much as we

could. Gender education in various contexts and formats became part of our professional activity. Indeed, our two main public roles were as educators and experts, although there was not a great deal of public interest in our approach to gender. Still, we used every opportunity to deliver lectures and seminars; we never refused an interview with the media; and, most important, we continued to work with our students.

It has to be said that the interests of the Russian media were largely driven by superficial, calendar-related reasons. Usually, gender campaigns explode on 8 March and 23 February, that is, respectively, International Women's Day and Russian Army Day. On these dates, journalists interview the same few experts – whose number one can count on the fingers of one hand – over and over again, asking them to comment on the status of women in Russia. We readily agreed simply out of civic duty, but also to let people know that we exist and to give an account of the gender problems facing society. However, deep down, we regarded such public sociology activities as thankless tasks. Moreover, our lack of practice in communicating with the media led to constant mishaps, misunderstandings and misleading information. Making things even worse, we often did not have control over the final reports that were broadcast.

### *The growing hostility to feminism and our response*

Gender studies had successfully established a niche for itself during the 1990s. Furthermore, our careers were advancing in a healthy way. However, in the background, behind these positive developments, there were ominous signs. There was a growing hostility to gender studies and feminism from the left and the right. Critiques mixed together with academic and political arguments. Those who favored democratization in Russian society according to the liberal paradigm represented a critique from the left. They claimed that the gender perspective was an implant; that it was a fashion and a brand imposed by an academic imperialism; that gender problems either do not exist or were so insignificant in Russia that there was no reason to talk about them; that we live in a society where women dominate, as a result of the Soviet regime having destroyed the normal, i.e. liberal-patriarchal, gender order. They also argued that gender researchers simply exploited an inflated interest to deliver a poor quality product. These arguments appeared to be a strategy to exclude gender studies from the academic mainstream. Often, these critics had only a very superficial knowledge of feminism and gender studies, defining the entire field exclusively by its worst examples, which, in truth, did exist. Critics from the right, on the other hand, rightfully asserted that feminism and gender studies would destroy the foundations of patriarchy, promote multiple sexualities, question gender roles and demand equal opportunities for women.

Our voices were weak, and only a few were willing to listen to us. Friendly journalists were few and far between, limited to two or three individuals. However, we cannot say that we suffered in such an environment. After all, we had our niche in the European University, where we could continue to do our academic work and were part of a group, albeit a small group, of academic feminists.

At that time, during the 1990s, the academic gender community actively discussed two issues in particular: first, the loss of the critical impulse in Russian gender studies and the rise of a fake gender studies; and second, strategies for the institutionalization of



gender studies. With regard to the first, the 1990s saw all sorts of people and organizations gather under the gender banner. As soon as gender issues received international interest and funding, they attracted a lot of attention in Russia, including from those who, under the cover of gender studies, published anti-feminist texts that glorified traditional gender regimes. Under the brand name of 'gender,' the critical drive of feminism was transformed into a toothless reproduction of role theory, at best.

We took the following positions in these discussions (Barchunova, 2000; Brandt, 2003; *Doing Gender na russkom pole*, 2004; Gurko, 1998; Kletsin, 1998; Kletsina, 2002; Ushakin, 2000; Voronina, 2001; Zvereva, 2003). First, gender studies in Russia had developed into an umbrella category that contained both critical and opportunistic positions. Second, we tried to pursue our own path in gender research rather than sinking our energies into internal quarrels and purges. We sought to strengthen contacts with friendly researchers in Russia and abroad and to support the feminist wing of gender studies. Third, we believed that the crowding of gender studies was the result of fashion and innovation and that over time the ballast would disappear. In our view this is indeed what has happened, but we will discuss this below. Fourth, we positioned ourselves as experts emphasizing the need for a scientific approach to gender issues, and we tried our best to demonstrate this in our publications.

In the course of the discussion over the second issue, we formulated a dual strategy for institutionalizing gender studies in Russia (Zdravomyslova and Temkina, 2001). We realized that gender studies was marginal within the Russian academy for reasons that went beyond the backwardness of Russian social science, the lack of institutionalization and the effects of the political and economic conjuncture. The marginality of gender studies was supported by the entire cultural context of patriarchy that viewed gender studies as feminism and regarded feminism in any form (liberal or radical) as opposing essentialist traditions of Russian culture. The balance of forces was heavily weighted against feminism. In order to prevent gender studies from sliding into a ghetto, it was necessary to bring gender sensitivity into mainstream social science. In this way, we hoped that academic audiences would hear the feminist voice and join discussions on the subject, something they had so far avoided. This would mean recognizing scholars who were unknown to mainstream scholarship. We called this the strategy of academic integration. The second strategy of 'autonomization,' on the other hand, implied building an interdisciplinary, transnational gender community where everyone would find support from either local colleagues or the international community. This was an ambitious program that could not be realized in the short run.

## **Gender backlash and the demand for gender expertise**

Thus, by the beginning of the year 2000 the community of gender researchers was weak and fragmented. Gender issues had a low public resonance; the demand for gender education and expertise was slight. Only a small number of NGOs and feminists supported us, while media interest was driven by the two calendar dates. Although we worked hard to communicate with various audiences, it did not have much of an effect. Gender studies, which were being torn apart by the dilemmas of their own contradictions, remained on the periphery of the Russian academy. Strategies to incorporate gender perspectives

into traditional institutions contributed to the withering away of the critical stance, which led to tense relations between activists and academic feminists. As Popkova and Tartakovskaya (2010: 14) write, 'Feminism disappeared from academic gender studies rather quickly. The pursuit of an academic career usually leads to compromises. As soon one secures a position at a university, it turns out that one has something to lose.' Furthermore, the appearance of gender 'window-dressing' – an imitation of gender studies – and limited gender awareness in the public sphere made us wary of traditional forms of public sociology based on interacting with the mass media.

By the beginning of the 2000s, the political and economic environment around gender studies had changed. With the decline in international funding, gender studies found itself in a difficult economic situation. Many centers closed down. The political fashion for gender was over. On the contrary, gender studies were now perceived as 'politicized' and a threat to authentic Russian discourse. Those who only saw gender studies as a source of grants started to leave the field. Academic feminists remained but with very little support and in shrinking numbers. Yet, they became more experienced and more confident than they had been in the 1990s. Soon, however, the picture began to change. Politics started talking gender. But how!

### *Gender issues in Putin's Russia*

Initially, in Vladimir Putin's Russia, gender issues were raised in connection with family and demographic policies. During his second presidential term, Putin came forward with a proposal to overcome Russia's demographic crisis by stimulating the birth rate. Reproductive decisions would be shaped by a 'mother's capital' – a single but financially substantial payment to women who gave birth to two or more children. Feminist researchers criticized this program, stressing its gender insensitivity, its inefficiency and the consequences of drawing women out of the labor market. The critique had little impact, but the discussion continues. The entry of such gender issues into the political arena led to the demand for studies of family patterns, the balance between family chores and paid work, the efficiency of family policies, the gender component of family policies and reproductive health.

As part of the study of the effects of family policies, we interviewed parents, primarily mothers with two or more children, who were beneficiaries of the assistance. We voiced their concerns about the underdeveloped and limited measures for supporting families and the insensitivity toward parents and their distrust of the government and bureaucrats. We presented the results not just in academic publications but also in public forums (both real and virtual). The regional authorities in St. Petersburg supported our study of the gender dimensions of social policy. Our conclusions were included in the recommendations of the city committee for gender equality, a committee that exists to this day (Borozdina et al., 2012).

At the end of 2000s, gender issues started to be intensively pursued in the legal sphere. Conservatives (law-makers and civic organizations) blocked the Law on Gender Equality, pushed through bills that would limit women's reproductive rights and proposed bills against the rights of sexual minorities. As a result, gender issues became politicized, and they entered public debate. In the course of those debates, various ideological positions

emerged, inaugurating the fight between different gender ideologies and between different values. In these confrontations, the conservative discourse was particularly powerful, entailing a mobilization against gender equality and demanding a return to traditional national Orthodox values – to the ‘normal’ family, with a corresponding conventional role for women. We can now see the results of our gender education. Now we have opponents, who have finally realized what we meant. We see that our opponents learned the lesson rather well. Now, they understand the meaning of gender studies and gender ideology.

Therefore, paradoxically, the conservative political atmosphere created a demand for our knowledge, our intellectual abilities and our expertise – all of which is now directed against the conservatives and in support of the ideology of gender equality and sexual and reproductive freedom. Now, let’s have a look at how gender issues have been expressed in the political and public arenas.

First, the very term ‘gender’ triggered protest from the conservatives. Interestingly, they had the correct interpretation of the term, matching its definition in gender theory, as a social construction of gender differences and sexuality. The conservatives made their position very clear during the 2012 Duma debates on the Law on Gender Equality, which they saw as a threat to Russian society.<sup>4</sup> In its press release, the organization Family, Love and Fatherland (2012) declared, ‘After examining this law, representatives of families and parents joined Orthodox and patriotic organizations to conclude that the law poses a threat to the demographic security of Russia and endangers family institutions and fundamental cultural and moral values.’ This quotation shows how nationalistic rhetoric combined with gender conservatism.

Second, at the end of 2011 Russian ‘pro-lifers’ submitted the Duma amendments to the Health Protection Law, which would have substantially reduced women’s reproductive rights by limiting access to abortions. This led to protests by some feminist organizations over the Internet and even on the streets. While most of these amendments were ultimately rejected, politicians, doctors, religious leaders, demographers, sociologists, representatives of NGOs and activists of various civic initiatives from both sides joined the debate. Both sides promoted their views in the public media. They used different forms of propaganda to present their perspectives: pickets, demonstrations, participation in talk shows and the distribution of petitions. Activist feminist groups organized a public campaign to ‘fight against abortions, not against women!’ This took place in 2011, and at the same time anti-abortion organizations (such as Warriors for Life or Resistance to Killing Children) continued to participate in public debates and in Russia-wide protests to ban abortion. Each side drew on their own experts.

Third, some regions of the Russian Federation adopted a law prohibiting ‘propaganda’ on behalf of homosexuals and pedophiles (St. Petersburg, Archangelsk, Krasnodar, Novosibirsk and other regions). There is a similar federal law that was passed in the Duma on 25 January 2013. The new law suffers from inconsistencies and terminological ambiguity – the term ‘propaganda’ is not defined, and pedophiles are mixed up with homosexuals. The law restricts freedom of speech and criminalizes the gay/lesbian community. It has powerful repressive potential, symbolic significance and practical implications as a tool to suppress political opposition. Moreover, it makes it more difficult to deal with the real, complex problems of pedophilia, violence and the vulnerability of

children. Although milder, nevertheless it is reminiscent of the laws of the Stalinist period.

Fourth, the Law on Juvenile Justice was blocked. As in previous cases, it was opposed by conservative mobilization that included the so-called 'community of parents' and organizations that act as the transmission belts of the Russian Orthodox Church. All these legislative moves are part of a broad conservative mobilization against gender equality, reproductive health and sexual education.

Fifth, in February 2012, against the backdrop of protests organized under the banner of 'Free Elections,' Pussy Riot arrived on the political stage, exciting public debate about many issues, including gender. The punk group called itself feminist. They held a protest performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, calling it a punk prayer with the title 'Our Lady, Kick Putin Out!' The court sentenced two of the participants to two years in prison. Another participant was given a two-year suspended sentence. The trial caused a major stir not only in Russia but also abroad. There were actions in defense of Pussy Riot and collective appeals to Putin calling for the release of the participants. However, the Orthodox community and Russian Orthodox Church remained unmoved. They demanded heavy punishment for offending the feelings of their believers. Pussy Riot's protest defined Putin's regime as patriarchal and broadened the agenda for Russian feminism to include the fight for political democracy and against authoritarianism.

Sixth, on 9 April 2013, Patriarch Kirill declared, 'I consider very dangerous the phenomenon known as "feminism," because its organizations declare that the pseudo-freedom of women will be realized primarily outside marriage and family' (Pravmir.com, 2013). All these events are symptoms of the strength of conservative ideology in Russia, which goes beyond official authorities to include segments of civil society that exist through the support of the Russian Orthodox Church, itself allied to the ruling powers. The conservatives are fighting for ideological hegemony, decrying gender and feminism as their adversaries and as threats to the moral foundations and security of Russian society. Democratic and liberal resistance is fragmented, but it exists, nonetheless, and opposes the conservative offensive.

### *Political context and the growth of traditionalism*

The public discussion of gender issues takes place in a particular political context. In order to understand the possibility of gender researchers becoming public sociologists, we need to identify its key features.

Researchers who study political processes in Russia have concluded that during the 2000s there was a 'recentralization of state government and institutionalization of the authoritarian regime in the country' (Gelman and Ryzhenkov, 2010: 132). Although *de jure* Russia has a multi-party political system, *de facto*, political competition does not exist (Golosov, 2012: 54). In this regard, Russia has an open political system only in name, that is, only in the formal sense: a formal multi-party system and formal elections. The latter do not provide for a change in government, and the mechanism for political decision-making is not transparent. Accordingly, the government adopted a strategy of repression against democratic protests that were escalating during the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011–2012. Mass rallies led to clashes with the police and mass

arrests, followed by charges under Part 3 of Article 212 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (concerning mass disturbances) and Part 1 of Article 318 of the Criminal Code (concerning violence against representative authorities).

At the same time, the ruling authorities and the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church have supported the conservative mobilization. In the context of the authoritarian political tendencies of the 2000s, there has been a move in public discussion toward de-secularization, including growing attention to issues of religion in the mass media and an increase in the activity of religious organizations and their leaders (Verkhovsky, 2009).

The conservative turn of official ideology, with its demands for a return to traditional values and its criticism of any signs of westernization, was especially apparent in the debates concerning gender values and gender ideologies. Society is severely split on these issues, with the result that the conservative party has been consolidated while liberals are weak and scattered. Both parties have influential representatives in the structures of power. Both seek expertise from their own segments of the Russian academy.

### *The growing demand for gender expertise*

In such political contexts, there is a need for our gender expertise. The clients with whom we collaborate most frequently include the democratic gender-sensitive community; NGOs whose status is threatened by charges of being foreign agents; sexual minorities that are in danger of repression; feminist human rights activists who are advocates of equal opportunities and reproductive rights for women; and officials from the Regional Committee for Social Policy, who support gender equality. We provide verbal advice, write expert reviews of bills, participate in Internet forums, sign petitions against conservative laws and conduct empirical research.

Our educational activities also continue for students, NGOs and the general public. In addition, we help to develop gender-sensitive networks and civil society by contributing expertise, research and direct participation. Our studies carry a civic significance. Together with our students, we investigate the mechanisms of conservative mobilization and identify their alliances, resources and support strategies; we also study family and sexual policies and their gendered effects. There are emerging friendly media that are not afraid of feminism and realize that democrats must form a common bloc against authoritarianism and support the gender agenda.

When discussing the dilemmas of combining professional and public activities, we admit that we would rather spend time on the computer or doing research than to be talking on live broadcasts. Perhaps we do not have enough of the activist drive. Besides, in addition to needing experience in public debates, one has to have a thick skin to tolerate the open abusiveness of our ideological opponents. When debating reproductive rights, civil unions, sexual education or the rights of sexual minorities, some opponents accuse gender experts of debauchery, political trickery, moral degeneracy, conspiracy against Russia and national security and collaboration with world imperialism and Zionism. Their language is, to say the least, offensive. But these are the terms of public debate in the Russian media. Currently, in addition to verbal threats, to which feminists have become accustomed, we face the risk of political and criminal charges. In the context of authoritarian tendencies, this is not pleasant, to put it mildly. You are publicly charged

with being a western agent, endangering national security, threatening the Russian gene pool and, most generally, with a lack of patriotism.

We have to admit that public sociology is very costly in terms of time and energy. We appeal to diverse audiences and therefore have to reach beyond our academic style. Since there are very few gender researchers, we are stretched very thin. We have to pursue a multiplicity of roles, which under a shortage of resources, creates problems of balance and professional burnout.

## Conclusion

When gender studies were launched, public interest was very limited. This was the case even though, during the 1990s, gender studies had both an academic and a political mission to promote democracy (with respect to gender equality) and civil society (supporting initiatives against sexism and violence). Public interest in gender was so modest because Russians thought gender differences were natural and feminism was alien to the Russian context. Gradually, under the influence of academic and activist feminism and with the support of an international community, gender infiltrated the public sphere. This process was accompanied by frequent misunderstandings and reformulations of gender research, reducing it to the study of the conventional gender roles in society.

Our public role as gender researchers was to educate and to offer our expertise. NGOs, university students, students of summer schools and researchers and social science lecturers who wanted to advance their knowledge and skills were our audiences. We relied on interdisciplinary and transnational networks of gender studies. We also exercised *traditional* public sociology by conversing with journalists. However, we were wary of this activity, because such conversations about gender were often not sincere but fabricated.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the umbrella phase of gender studies ended. Gender studies became narrower and more critical, since today it does not bring money or compliments, but, on the contrary, it can bring disgrace and humiliation. At the same time, gender issues have become the focus of intense political debates. The authorities developed powerful new technologies of public manipulation as they pursued the gendering of politics. In these conditions, researchers face an open dismissal of their gender and feminist approaches. This is due to the competition for ideological hegemony, in which the conservatives are the most active, forming a united front with a section of the political elite, the Russian Orthodox Church and part of civil society. Gender backlash is taking place in the context of authoritarian trends in Russian politics, the growth of nationalism and anti-western attitudes that promote traditional values and traditional gender roles, oppose the Law on Gender Equality, protest sexual education and repress sexual minorities.

At the same time, there has also been an opposing trend – the development of a democratic community that shares liberal and leftist ideas. Ideas of gender equality and gender freedom are common among educated young people. We work for them. Our expertise and our educational efforts on any given local agenda are addressed to them.

We consider gender studies to be one of the most promising and important directions for public sociology. The anti-patriarchal potential of gender studies in the context of authoritarian tendencies can help the democratic opposition to authoritarianism. Thus, as

public sociologists, gender researchers are obligated to participate in debates where the gender obscurantism and political authoritarianism of our opponents dominate the conversation. At the same time, we feel support from a growing radical minority of the new generation. After all, we did succeed in recognizing gender and in creating a community of fellow thinkers. There are now people that follow feminism. We find supportive sectors of the academy that include scholars of disability, youth subcultures, the sociology of health, social movements and ethnicity.

That is why we want to be more than *traditional* public sociologists; we see our mission as also pursuing an organic public sociology. Here, we aspire to fulfill three roles simultaneously: experts; researchers who, in giving voice to public discontent, become vulnerable to reprisals; and builders of civil society, developing social networks of feminists and a gender-sensitive public.

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### Notes

1. This is taken from Zherebkina (2003), a book whose title signified the development of gender studies in the 1990s.
2. The first forum of the Russian women's organizations took place in 1991 under the slogan 'Democracy minus women is not democracy!'
3. Gender order, governed by the authoritarian state.
4. As stated in Article 1, this bill is intended to regulate 'relations regarding the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms with respect to discrimination by gender and/or by reasons associated with the presence of children.' The key terms used in the bill are 'gender equality,' 'gender discrimination,' 'gender balance' and 'positive discrimination.' In particular, gender equality is defined as 'the equal judicial status of men and women, including the provision of equal access to resources, and eliminating gender discrimination.' The bill prohibits gender discrimination against pregnant women or against men and women more generally 'for reasons associated with the presence of children.' The draft law defines the objectives of state policy as providing for gender equality in political and professional spheres of society. In addition, the law requires 'the support of families and people with family responsibilities and the formation of responsible motherhood and fatherhood.' As a mechanism to guarantee gender equality, the bill proposes the creation of a Commission for Issues of Gender Equality within the Government of the Russian Federation and the introduction of a Commissioner for Issues of Gender Equality. The bill sanctions monetary compensations for the victims of discrimination according to 'the nature, degree and duration of gender discrimination.'

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## Résumé

Dans cet article, nous examinons le difficile développement des études des genres en Russie en tant qu'exemple de la sociologie publique. En ce qui concerne les données empiriques, nous nous concentrons principalement sur l'expérience que nous avons acquise dans le cadre du programme d'études des genres mené à l'Université européenne de St. Petersburg, mais nous faisons également référence à d'autres cas. Nous observons comment le contexte politique et académique des années 1990 a créé des possibilités en matière d'innovations académiques qui, sur le plan idéologique, mettent au défi la patrie soviétique; nous évoquons également des critiques sexuées des changements introduits à l'ère post-soviétique. Nous discutons les effets de l'institutionnalisation rapide, mais partielle, des études des genres dans le contexte académique russe et comment 'genre' est devenu le terme générique pour à la fois les points de vue féministes et antiféministes. Nous estimons qu'avec la diminution du support international pour les études des genres dans les années 2000, la coutume d'effectuer des études de ce type et leur avantage économique ont décliné, et seul un petit groupe de chercheurs conservent un engagement envers l'approche féministe du genre. Nous mettons l'accent sur la politisation du genre dans la Russie de Putin au cours de la dernière décennie et sur le rôle des chercheurs féministes dans l'analyse du nouveau conservatisme exprimé dans l'idéologie du genre. Nous examinons les problèmes rencontrés quand l'expertise publique est combinée aux travaux académiques dans le domaine particulier de la politique des genres.

## Mots-clés

Études des genres, patrie, politique, Russie, sociologie publique

## Resumen

En este artículo se analiza el precario desarrollo de los estudios sobre género en Rusia como un ejemplo de sociología pública. Para la evidencia empírica, nos concentramos principalmente en nuestra propia experiencia en el programa de estudios de género de la Universidad europea en San Petersburgo, pero también hacemos referencia a otros casos. Observamos cómo el contexto político y económico de los años '90 creó oportunidades para las innovaciones académicas que desafiaron ideológicamente el patriarcado soviético y convocaron críticas de género de los cambios post-soviéticos. Analizamos los efectos de la rápida pero parcial institucionalización de los estudios de género en el contexto académico ruso y cómo el género se convirtió en un término abarcativo para las posturas feministas y antifeministas. Decimos que como el apoyo internacional para estudios sobre género disminuyó en los años 2000, disminuyó la moda y el beneficio económico de realizar estudios sobre el tema, y solo un pequeño grupo de investigadores mantienen su compromiso con el enfoque feminista del género. Nos centramos en la politización del género en la última década de la Rusia de Putin y en el rol de las investigadoras feministas en el análisis del nuevo conservadurismo, expresado en la ideología de género. Examinamos los problemas de combinar la experiencia pública y el trabajo académico en el ámbito específico de la política de género.

## Palabras clave

Estudios de género, patriarcado, política, Rusia, sociología pública