

«Women scientists resemble guinea pigs...» Anecdotes about women-scientists in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

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Abstract:

The thematization of the history of gender discriminations, the analysis of changes of their character in Russia after 1985 became possible owing to the collapse of the so-called “soviet scholarship”. From that time on the author collected the anecdotes, that reflect the inequities in the employment status, compensation, and reputational standing of women in the sciences. The tools of folklore studies (folkloristic) have been a crucial resource for understanding the nature, impact, and prospects for changing gender-based forms of oppression. The author hopes that in this spirit this text actively draws on, and contributes to elimination of asymmetry in Russian sciences.

1 The anthropology of professionals, including academics, is a new branch of social and cultural anthropology. It lies at the intersection of ethnology, and qualitative sociology, using in-depth interviews, included observation, and case studies as principal methods and types of research. Although the application of the term "ethnology" to professional academics may seem odd, their traditions can be analyzed in similar terms, with subcultures defined by their presenting features, symbols, attributes and folklore, and social and behavioral norms, forms of communication and stereotypes. I will explore scholars' community, establishing the official standards and the unofficial codes of behavior, lifestyles, forms of routine discourse, symbols, attributes, and practices.

2 The gender focus in my research project emphasizes the examination of the practice of power relations in the academic community, rather than a conventional description of the social and professional lives of men and women. By emphasizing power, my project draws upon feminist theory to provide methodological approaches.

3 Specifically, my analysis relies upon the opposition between *traditional* and *feminist* science, as enunciated by the American cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo. Traditional science is marked by: objectivism – the claims of scientific objectivity, political and emotional neutrality; imperialism - the objectivization of the subject, in which the researcher ‘looks down’ upon the observed phenomenon, in the imperialist manner that the ‘white traveller’ observed indigenous people; monumentalism - the assumption that such phenomena as the structural parameters of the social equilibrium and ethnic culture are unsusceptible to change (Rosaldo 400). Feminist anthropology adopts the opposite methodological basis. The claims of objectivity are replaced by empathy and

involvement, recognizing that respondents' ethnographic and social-psychological information has its own worth, as do the analysts' personal experiences, even though traditional academic discourse have tried to marginalize them. It eschews imperialism and the denigration of the culture being studied, in favor of an analysis of the superstitions and prejudices the analysts bring from their own culture with the same care as the analysis of the culture under study (Rosaldo, *Culture* 30).

4 Investigation of women academics' everyday life provides fertile soil for validation of the methods adopted in the feminist anthropology. Responding to the appeal of German historians researching *everyday life*: "Grabe, wo Du stehst!" (Lindqvist 295). Bulgarian, Belorussian and Russian researchers have developed a project focusing on women scholars' routine realities in the socialist and post-socialist periods. Specifically, the project focuses on women employed in the institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences who have managed to succeed in their professional advancement and creativity.

5 This project is not focused merely on a description of the observed phenomena, but on gaining insight into the mechanisms of change, utilization of time, and modes of the replication of gender asymmetry. For that purpose, the research has compiled both typical and atypical cases. We address these specific questions: What creates women scholars' routine practices? What are the specific meanings assigned to the women scholars' activities within specific social interactions? How does academic community treat women's work and scholarly success? How do other women treat such women?

6 Our initial inquiries allowed us to conclude that first of all scholarly success meant recognition received at the *early* stage in one's professional career, specifically, defense of the second dissertation (Both in Russia (as well as the Soviet Union) instead of a PhD there existed a system of two level dissertations. It was possible to only earn one degree – that of a Candidate of Science (in a specific field). Its level seemed to be comparable to the western PhD). However there was a possibility to move to the next level and earn the so-called Doctorate degree (the corresponding requirements would be different) before reaching the age of forty. At the same case, a subjective estimate of other factors relating to scholarly success (citation index counts, number of grants, invitations for guest lectures, numbers of graduate students (in case of USSR and RF those, pursuing Candidate degree), etc.) reveals their insignificance. Project participants work from the hypothesis that even successful women who have doctoral degrees and the rank of professor (an equivalent of tenure) experience discrimination. Discrimination mechanisms are reproduced via ethic and cultural stereotypes that suppress both overt and latent forms of female dominance in the academic environment.

7 All our respondents consented to narrate their professional and private lives. Usually, professionals observe taboos with regards to working with members of the groups to which they belong: doctors are reluctant to operate on doctors, and psychoanalysts avoid undergoing analysis themselves. However, I did not experience a similar polarization from the subjects of my research. On the contrary, my female respondents wanted to know how their own stories correlated with those of other women and how they fit into the larger study. This was not only a manifestation of curiosity (so often regarded as a female trait), but of professional inquisitiveness. For many of these women, their professional work, even when it is low-paid (underpaid) and is of low prestige, is a means of self-realization. One respondent even termed it a "diagnosis": "Medieval studies for a woman is not a profession, it's a diagnosis."

8 Even in Moscow, the potential pool of respondents is rather small, but their stories are particularly revealing, exhibiting a certain typology based on age, discipline, social and psychological makeup and other factors. This group can serve as a basis for studying how the subordinate, marginalized social status of women in the academic community replicates the existing cultural stereotypes.

9 Three anecdotes about women scientists are particularly revealing:

- Women scientists resemble guinea pigs. Like guinea pigs, they are neither Guinean nor pigs; and so women scientists are neither scientists, nor women.

A man in an elite dressmaker's says:

- I want you to sew multilayered underpants for me!

- What for?

- My wife is a scientist: she prefers researching things to attaining the final result.

A woman parasitologist says, while looking in the microscope:

- Is there some reason you, pest, have been absent for so long...?

10 The first and second texts reveal an *object-based approach* towards women. The author of the first text, a man, claims for himself the right to judge women both as specialists (*neither scientists*) and as bearers of a certain gender role enjoined upon her by society, at which she fails (*nor women*).

11 In the second text, the very essence of women scientists' work is ridiculed; her "scientific research" is reduced to the butt of a joke. The comic effect is intensified through the conflict between women's traditional gender role of attaining a "result" (that is, fulfilling her reproductive function) and her scientific activity of research. Thus, this second anecdote deprecates both the woman's role as a scholar and her status as a "real" woman. A participant in an Internet chat room posted a comment pertinent to this anecdote: "If a woman lacks

humor, she should be a scientist." One should also note that in Russian the same word is used to describe scientists in any field, including those who deal with social sciences.

12 The third text shows the woman acting in her capacity as a scientist, but her scientific objectivity is replaced by a subjective, "feminine" subjectivity. Instead of a capable scientist, the anecdote features a common cultural stereotype: the nagging housewife waiting for her husband, who (as usual) comes home late from work. Although the wife is annoyed with her husband, she does not throw him out. In Russia, women are supposed to be afraid of being left alone; the social role of a married woman is more prestigious than that of a single one and especially divorced.

13 All three of these anecdotes about women scientists appeared in the post-Soviet period, amidst the *third wave* of female entry into the Russian scientific academic community. The first wave occurred in the 1920s, under the auspices of Soviet policy aimed at eliminating the gender asymmetry in science. The second wave occurred in the 1960s, when additional employment opportunities in academic institutions were created. The third wave came about in the so-called post-Perestroika period; it was connected with the outflow of men into more lucrative activities, and with brain drain abroad. At present, women make up 33.7% of academic employees, although this overall figure includes the over-representation of women in humanities institutions, where they exceed 50% (Pushkareva 128).

14 The increasing presence of women in academic institutions has resulted both in positive accomplishments and in a backlash of the sort exhibited in the anecdotes above.

- Women have shown improved performance in academic endeavors. However, the success has spurred the creation of denigrating terminology, such as "educational impostor" (*samozvanka-obrazovanka*) and 'educated proletarian' (*nauchennye rabotnitsy*), that undercuts the value of women scholars and teachers. Women's profession organizations appeared spontaneously at the beginning of the 1990s, such as the Center for Gender Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the unions of women-mathematicians, and physicists, the union of women of Moscow State University. These organizations countered the Soviet Women's Committee of the Soviet period, which had remained inactive.

15T The androcentric Russian culture responded to these innovations with new jokes aimed at deprecating women's organizational abilities and their sense of solidarity: Resolutions carried by the International Women's Congress.

- 1) All women are sisters!
- 2) All men are animals!
- 3) There is nothing to wear...

16 The "double standard," so common in male-dominated communities, is found in the academic world, too. If a woman scientist wants to improve her professional standing, she is considered a 'drudge', and if she tries to look attractive in a feminine way, she needs to dispense with the goal of gaining recognition as a scholar. In response to the increase of women's influence in the academic sphere (especially in gender studies), male scholars created the following snide comments, which quickly gained wide circulation: "Women seem to have a lot of sex until they are 40 years old; and then they prefer 'gender'." (Another version: "Why are you interested in 'gender'? You are married, aren't you?").

17 These comments are marked by both sexism and ageism. It is not coincidental that women scholars tend to positions of prominence in their fields after the age of forty.

18 The scientific community, made up mostly of men, treats attractive women scientists as sex objects, as illustrated in the following joke: "Women biologists drink until they lose their pulse (or, until they become petrified and pass out), women mathematicians drink to infinity, women chemists drink until they have no reaction, women physicists drink until they lose resistance."

19 "A woman scientist is like an unbroken horse: interesting, but nobody needs one." ("A woman physicist is like an unbroken horse: rare, but useless.") Clearly, in this product of the neo-patriarchal Russian culture, it is only the antithesis of a woman scientist – that is, a woman without any academic credentials – who qualifies as "useful." Such a *simple woman* would not care about epistemological ambiguity or the discursive chaos of postmodernism; she is *simpler* and that makes her *more useful*. Other jokes (which I will omit here) contain still more overt sexual connotations, all reflecting a discourse of superiority common in the dominant (male) culture.

20 Male culture underpins the academic establishment of Russia. Women have been taught their place in it, making themselves useful through their stereotypical devotion to duty, their exceptional capacity for work, their discipline. A typical joke speaks to the dominant conception of women's place in scientific research:

- Hey, babe! You've got such long fingers... Do you play the piano?

- No, I wash test tubes in the institute...

21 Women's value, then, rests in their diligence rather than in their knowledge or talent. The statistics bear out the manifestation of prejudice: 52 % of women employees of academic institutions do not have an academic degree, and 57 % of junior research assistants in academic research institutes (SRI).

22 Women are abundant in the lower stratum of scientific research, where their roles mimic those of domestic housewives. It is in service professions – cleaner, cook, teacher, physician, psychotherapist – that women play the major role. Women secure *the rear* for their husbands or chiefs. From the home to the workplace, the notion that women belong in supporting roles prevails, becoming even an obsession within the academic community. This attitude is enunciated overtly at in the semi-private setting of parties after presenting and defending their theses, which often feature toasts of this type:

It is not only these Atlantes who support the sanctuary of science, but also the caryatids, the wives of scientists, too. The tender arms of these women do not yield to strong male arms, but the scientists' wives take care of their husbands, give them moral support, allow them to immerse themselves in science and free them from external concerns. How would the science advance, if scientists got stuck in household duties? Let's drink to the caryatids of the sanctuary of sciences! Promote the advancement of science and your husbands to new frontiers!

23 In post-Soviet Russian, many businessmen have wives who are scholars. However, these men treat their wives' achievements as their own property, to be flaunted whenever an opportunity occurs. When both spouses are scholars in the same field, though, the men do not brag about their wives' scholarly accomplishments. In a biographical interview, one woman lamented:

My scientific achievements did not help me to become happy... We had been married for 17 years, when I defended my second dissertation. My husband was in a dismal mood at the party, and the next day he said to me that he decided to divorce me, because he "didn't want to be the husband of a Margaret Thatcher." I burst into tears. But what could be done in such a situation? That was how he showed which of us was the master.

24 Women who attained the highest academic degrees do not envy their female coworkers, who gave up academic work and pursuit of the doctorate during perestroika, and turned into so-called "consumption managers" – housewives to "New Russians." These wives of businessmen see to the building of huge country mansions and discourage their daughters and granddaughters from intellectual pursuits. Unlike their former coworkers, women academics are preoccupied with the preservation of child-rearing techniques that were widespread from the end of 1950s until the beginning of 1970s, which foster girls' scholarly interests. In the 21st century, they still adhere to the intellectual values their parents taught them. They hold that the flexibility in time scheduling, the fulfillment of intellectual work, the

opportunities of personal advancement and self-realization, and friendly relationships with other intellectuals will offset the miserable salaries.

25 The respondents in our interviews recounted stories of obstacles being swept from their paths to scholarly achievement, but in reality demonstrate their moral courage and the success of their coping strategies. None of respondents claimed that she had not earned her doctoral degree through hard work. On the contrary, each account speaks to how academic achievements came as a result of independent and self-sacrificing work. (Only in some cases did there happen to be the support of a husband or an institute (research center) administration.) At the time of our interview, most respondents tended to romanticize the time when they started their research and had to overcome great difficulties (one of them recalled a German saying "Anfang ist immer schwer"). Although most of these women came from academic families (evidence of status replication), no respondent thought that her social origin gave her a better opportunity to start with. Their reticence can best be seen as an attempt to excuse and legitimize their intense study and their ability to achieve, on their own and not at their teachers' behest. While telling their stories about 'all the difficulties of youth', women scholars tried to hide the fact that as children of upper-level academics, they had a sort of social launching pad. Instead, they pointed out that they had had no more than equal opportunity with their classmates, and therefore they attributed their success to hard work and self-denial. This biographical narrative is typical of women of the academic elite and it differs from those of women from other social strata, for example, business-men's wives, who seem to have traded their communal apartments for fashionable seaside villas without the least internal angst. The other difference lies in academic women's disinclination to attribute their success to divine intervention; the scholarly environment tends to promote a certain level of religious skepticism. Business-men's wives, in contrast, are prone to explain their unexpected wealth by "It was so ordained..."

26 Strange as it may seem, women scholars tend to downplay their administrative activity, saying such things as "I never aspired to power," and "I never asked the administration for a promotion." In this way, they prefer to emphasize "other more important factors" in their lives. Among these 'other' factors, the first is the husband, or an academic advisor, department head or director, especially among unmarried women. They took on the role of promoters, as defenders and bread-winners. The American anthropologist Sherry Ortner, who laid the foundations for feminist anthropology, recognized the ideological practice latent in such relationships and coined the term *refusal to act* to describe women's roles.

27 It is characteristic of academic women to attribute their scholarly achievements (such as the doctoral degree, professorial rank, department head, membership in international organizations) to a favorable conjuncture of circumstances and the help of "other important factors." None of women respondents admitted that she *had been pressing* for official recognition of her achievements. Quite the contrary; all of them realized that "they had been placed under artificial constraints, but they did not resist them, waiting for some day in future when somebody would come and offer them a better opportunity."

28 Women scholars' biographical narratives reveal their fear of losing reliable protection, of being left by husbands, of being unable to cope in such volatile situation. They did not boast of personal achievements, even in the academic sphere. This discourse reflects the impact of the Soviet-era concept of the *working mother*, who was valued not for her success in the professional arena, but rather primarily as a wife who reared her children and earned extra money. A sizable majority (75 %) of respondents who had accomplished significant prominence in the academic sphere were not married at the time of our interview. Thus, they had no obvious motive to adopt such a deferential attitude towards marital obligations. But married women scholars tend to value family preservation; sometimes they placed it ahead of their professional achievements (Tichenor 212-221).

29 Women academics' own reluctance to acknowledge constraints might explain why the "glass ceiling" continues to obstruct the progress of many women in science? Even though officially it does not exist, an impenetrable barrier remains. At present, women scientists trying to gain official recognition in their scientific communities encounter practically the same obstacles as her sisters thirty years ago. In the registers of second (doctoral) degree holders in Russia, women made up 20 % in 2000 (compared with 14 % in 1980); associate members of the Russian Academy of Sciences – 15 %, academicians – 1.3 %. The Presidium of the Supreme Certification Commission that authorizes the approval of resolutions by academic councils is comprised of 26 men and only 1 woman. There is only one woman on the Council of the Russian Foundation for Humanities, which manages the financing of new scholarly projects. In the institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences, only 1/5 of the posts of laboratory heads are held by women; only 4% of deputy directors are women, and only 2% of directors are women. However, few women seem likely to protest against the existing practice: 67 % of women scientists who were interviewed (mostly at Academy institutes in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk) believe, that *management*, including in the academic sphere, will remain men's prerogative.

30 Why don't women scholars object to the inequitable relationship, but instead take it for granted? Despite the low salaries, the women interviewed (from laboratory assistants to institute directors) emphasized that they are satisfied by their work (about 90 % of respondents). This high rate of satisfaction implies that women are interested in pursuing their scholarly work, rather than better salaries, higher positions, or even recognition for their academic achievements. As a professor of musicology said, "An attractive, honored profession is worth much in itself."

31 The texts of the interviews reflect the existence of a very complicated array of relationships between the men and women of scientific (academic) work projects that extend beyond institutional modes of interaction. Official posts and ranks are not of great importance. But an analysis revealed, surprisingly, the significance of behavioral patterns, consistent speech constructions, discursive practices, and the rituals of the workday such as joint tea-drinking.

32 While recounting their everyday lives as scholars, Russian women underline the fact that the heads of their scientific units replicate *familial relationships* in their sectors (departments, chairs etc.), preserving multi-generational structures and a complicated hierarchy under the leadership of an all-knowing head of family. The posts of department heads in postgraduate and doctoral programs in our scientific and research institutes are almost without exception held by women acting as careful *institute mummies*. Just as in the traditional Russian patriarchal family and in the Soviet-era governmental structures, paternalistic relationships pervaded all institutions and the society itself, and *academic families* differ. No matter who the head of a sector is, either a woman or a man, the unit's relationships take a typically patriarchal hierarchical form. The department head never performs the set-up for tea-drinking rituals or washes the cups of colleagues at the end of a working day. Forms of relationships are governed by strict hierarchization: those people holding higher post are addressed with the polite form of "you" (except for members of the same research group, persons of the same age, and those people who are accustomed to socializing informally during research expeditions).

33 The most important component of a scientist's everyday life is still preparation for participation and participation in meetings of academic congresses and other types of academic conventions. Respondents still recall vividly the severe reduction of such meetings that took place 10-15 years ago due to lack of financing. According to their accounts, in that period women scientists, in an attempt to establish networks based in traditional family ties, began to hold meetings "for insiders." Through their "secret," "quiet" leadership, women

scientists tried to retain women in post-Soviet science, and their efforts may be seen as the real story of the period, although they could not be recognized, unlike the open, and theoretically legitimate and legal governance of men.

34 On the other hand, the struggle over the past twenty years to obtain grants has been the second important component of everyday life for academics, for both men and women. In accordance with official procedure, project principal investigators must file all applications and prepare all reports. But often higher-ranking academics are named as the principle investigators of projects in order to facilitate the acceptance of the grant applications, women scientists, who generally have lower status, are relegated to "project manager" positions and routine work. Thus, this aspect of everyday life in scientific communities is marked by gender differences. The following joke illustrates the reality: "Our women are able to perform any work, even the most difficult, but only under the leadership of men."

35 Few of the male scientists started their careers as secretaries in a scientific area where they had to retype other scholars' articles or answer the telephone. But for most women respondents, this was a typical rung on their career ladder. After a variable period of time, they proceeded to the second stage – that of writing the doctoral dissertation. Most women scholars described the third stage, preparation for the doctoral defense, as the most difficult. They faced great difficulties when they took the posts of professor, leading scientific officer and especially principal scientific officer. Most respondents who decided to write the second dissertation did so in secret, and defended it at an academic institution far away from the ones where they worked. Only a few had the courage to undertake the unequal struggle with administration for promotion, with its concomitant stress and moral and psychological pressure. All the institutes under the Russian Academy of Sciences constrain women's professional advancement, while promoting male colleagues who are inactive and contribute little of scholarly value, but represent no challenge to authority.

36 When asked the direct question "At what stages of your scientific career did you experience sex discrimination?" most women respondents pointed to the period before defense of the second dissertation and afterwards, when the administration tried to ignore the defense and made no change in salary or position in light of it. Nearly half of the women interviewed emphasized that their contributions to scholarship were inappropriately devalued, and that their rights to their intellectual property were impaired in the course of publication of their work. A doctor said: "A chapter of a monograph was based on my manuscripts; however I was not included in the list of authors – since I was only an assistant to the Chair at that

time, and then a Candidate of Medical Science. And I walked out, and went to another scientific and research institute...”

37 We encountered numerous examples of this type in our interviews. In writing my reports on this project, I wanted to include the most typical examples of social practices at the highest levels of academic hierarchies that devalued women. Women who hold doctoral degrees suffer practically the same indignities and discrimination as women who are junior research assistants and senior researchers. But I did not intend to dwell upon the topic of latent gender discrimination as recorded in the folklore of the academic profession and in women’s biographic stories; most of the respondents did not want to focus on these forms of discrimination, and they preferred to explain their situations as unrelated to gender:

I would not term it gender discrimination; it is most likely just a matter of personal social capabilities, what might be called social competence, and the ability to build relations with the right people. It is a problem of a talent to survival in an academic world, rather than gender imbalance. Talented people always face difficulties, and in this situation it is talent that suffers such restrictions (and not being a woman). Forget your gender ...

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