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Gender inequality in Russia's rural informal economy

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes gender inequality in Russia's rural informal economy. Continuation of unequal gendered roles in Russia's rural informal economy suggests that tradition and custom remain strong. Gender differentials in time spent tending the household garden remain significant, as is the distribution of household tasks into gendered roles in ways that effect professional advancement for women. Land ownership is the domain of men, and women are not owners in Russia's new economy. Moreover, men earn more from entrepreneurial activity, a function of how male and female services are valued and priced in society. Responsibility that is shared includes the marketing of household food. The conclusion is that institutional change is less impactful on gender inequality than persistence of culture and tradition.

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1. Introduction

Tremendous institutional change has occurred in Russian society, including the countryside, since 1992.¹ The core elements that defined Soviet agriculture are *not* paramount today—obligatory plans and production quotas, regulated food and labour markets, the presence of state-owned large farms, state controlled income levels, and strict regulation of entrepreneurial activity. Institutional reform facilitated income differentiation and stratification at the farm, household, and individual level. Property rights now include private ownership. Marketing options have expanded and large farms must be commercially successful in order to survive. Thus, in the rural formal economy there is significant institutional impact on economic behaviour, although not necessarily in the area related to gender equality.

The demise of the Soviet Union and resulting institutional change brought a collapse of the command economy. Regulated prices, planned output, guaranteed employment, and relative social egalitarianism have disappeared. Economic security in old age was decimated, as insecurity became the new normal. In rural society, economic insecurity engendered survival strategies and coping mechanisms at the farm, household, and individual level (Kalugina, 2002; Miller, 2002; Visser, 2003). Economic decline led not only to survival strategies but also created incentives to engage in small-scale entrepreneurship. Household income became less dependent on farm wages and transfer payments, and began to draw a larger percentage from the informal economy (Maslova et al., 2007, pp. 85–6).

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¹ According to Douglass North, institutions consist of informal constraints, formal rules, and the enforcement of both.

The collapse of communism not only created new economic opportunities but also raised questions about the role of women in the new Russia. Some authors argued that women were 'losers' during the 1990s. Many social protections that benefited women during the Soviet period eroded as social policies went unfunded or under funded; women bore the brunt of unemployment; women's wages diverged from men's and the income gap grew larger; women had a higher incidence of poverty; sexual harassment became more prevalent; overt discrimination was common; and upward mobility for women remained difficult (Bridger, 1996; Bridger et al., 1996; Ashwin, 2000, 2006; Saarinen et al., 2013). Women experienced deteriorating medical care, and were negatively impacted by chronic wage arrears, which made caring for the family all the more difficult. Women also endured increasingly strained relations within the household as men struggled to cope with diminished economic status and falling standards of living for their families, for which they felt responsible. Many men consumed alcohol excessively and the incidence of domestic violence increased significantly (Kay, 2006). Similarly, rural women did not fare well during the 1990s. Rural unemployment for women, for example, was disproportionately high—an estimated 60 to 70 per cent of all rural unemployment even though women constituted just over one-half of the rural population (Mikhailov, 1996, p. 64). Just as shock therapy created survival strategies and coping mechanisms in the economy at large, so too in the rural economy. The question is whether survival strategies created change in gendered roles.

A significant aspect of adaptation to market reform was a turn to the informal economy, first as a means for survival and later to generate income. For this reason, gendered roles in Russia's rural informal sector are examined. The article addresses three main questions. (1) What are the characteristics of contemporary gender inequality in Russia's rural informal economy? (2) Is there evidence of discernible change from the past in gendered roles and inequality in the rural informal economy, in other words, how significant is institutional impact? (3) To what extent do contemporary economic roles reflect traditional values about the division of labour in Russia's rural informal economy?

To answer those questions, evidence is drawn from published statistical data from the Russian government, from various household surveys that span 1995–2013, and from selected focus group interviews.² The household surveys come from distinct regions at different times and therefore provide useful snapshots at separate points in time. The focus group interviews are from Kurgan oblast in 2013. The methodology for the surveys and interviews is explained in the Appendix at the end of the article.

2. Theory

The Western literature on contemporary rural Russia falls into two groupings. The first group examines the informal rural sector and analyzes household production from Russia's subsidiary agricultural plots, or household gardens (*lichnoe pod-sobnoe khoziaistvo*)—but gendered roles in the informal economy are not investigated (Kitching, 1998; O'Brien et al., 2000; Pallot and Nefedova, 2003, 2007; Wegren, 2005; Ioffe et al., 2006; O'Brien and Patsiorkovsky, 2006; Visser, 2008). A second group analyzes the formal economy by focusing on large farming enterprises and private farms, but again gender is not considered (Spoor, 2003; Lerman, 2008; Visser, 2008). An altogether separate group of studies is sensitive to gender but is not germane to rural Russia, although these studies do discuss both formal and informal sectors in the non-agricultural economy (Bridger et al., 1996; Sperling, 1999; Kay, 2000; Ashwin, 2006, 2006; Saarinen et al., 2013).

The present analysis situates Russia's rural informal economy at the intersection of two distinct theoretical literatures. The first theoretical literature is New Institutionalism, which argues that institutions are central in shaping and affecting behaviour. Because the transition from communism was unprecedented, New Institutionalism seemed especially relevant for understanding the attempt to incentivize behaviours supporting capitalism (Furubotn and Richter, 1991; Brinton and Nee, 1998). At the forefront of New Institutionalism is Douglass North, who argues that, 'institutions are the framework within which human interaction takes place. They are perfectly analogous to the rules of the game in a competitive team sport ... they consist of formal written rules as well as typically unwritten codes of conduct' (North, 1990, pp. 3–4). Institutional change was significant in the rural formal economy, where farm status, operation, and external economic relations converted to capitalist principles. Reforming the formal economy was an immense task, requiring that economic actors change their economic psychology, their analytical prism for decision-making, their cost-benefit estimations, and their actual economic behaviour. The rural formal and rural informal economies exist side by side. Institutional change in the informal economy was less dramatic, but there was some behavioural impact as explained below.

The second theoretical literature concerns the relationship between economic growth and value change. Inglehart and Norris (2003) find a gradual trend toward greater gender equality in nations that are secular and have post-modern, that is, non-traditional cultural values. As to the import of economic growth, which modernization theory asserts will change cultural values, Inglehart and Baker argue that, 'economic development tends to transform a given society in predictable directions, but the process and path are not inevitable. Many factors are involved, so any prediction must be contingent on the historical and cultural context of the society in question' (Inglehart and Baker, 2001, p. 21, emphasis added). In a subsequent book, Inglehart and Welzel confirmed the persistence of a society's historical-cultural heritage even when per capita GDP and structure of the labour force are controlled. They conclude that, 'Despite widespread talk of the globalization of culture, the nation remains a key unit of shared experience, with its educational and cultural institutions shaping the values of almost everyone in that society' (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, p. 69). With regard to gender equality, in a different book Inglehart and

² A subset of women is selected from the original 25 for this article. The participants are referred to as 'worker 1–4' or 'expert 1–11'.

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