



## The Great October 1917 Socialist Revolution, Women and Politics in Contemporary Russia

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### ABSTRACT

It is an undeniable fact that the great October 1917 Socialist Revolution in Imperial Russia brought in its wake unprecedented changes in the life of Russians. It also significantly altered the history of mankind in that it ushered in the first known socialist state in the ambience of the defunct Soviet Union. We observed in the course of Russian empire that women played pivotal roles and occupied conspicuous space in governance (Sophia, Anna Catherine the Great, Elizabeth II and others). But can it be said that women are still enjoying the same position hitherto assigned to them in imperial Russia today? This paper seeks to explore the role of women in contemporary Russian politics. Data will be collected from bibliographic, archival materials as well as dedicated internet sources. The paper concludes that the 1917 Revolution has negatively affected Russian women in that they have been relegated to the back stage vis-à-vis Russian politics as against the active part and roles women played in governance before the 1917 Revolution.

**Key Words:** Revolution, Women, Politics, Contemporary Russia, Soviet Union

#### iSTEAMS Proceedings Reference Format

Akin Ademuyiwa & Mathew Taiwo, M.A (2019): The Great October 1917 Socialist Revolution, Women and Politics in Contemporary Russia. Proceedings of the 18<sup>th</sup> iSTEAMS Multidisciplinary Cross-Border Conference, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana. 28<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2019. Pp 99-106.  
[www.isteam.net](http://www.isteam.net) - DOI Affix - <https://doi.org/10.22624/AIMS/iSTEAMS-2019/V18N1P9>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Russian Empire saw women playing significant roles in Russian affairs. During the Tsarist Period, both men and women have appeared in the enclave of authority as Tsars, Tsarevish, and Empress. Women were not only found to occupy just powerful or prominent roles in Imperial Russian affairs, they too rose to become a Queen (Tsarevish) of the Russian Empire. Some of these women left indelible mark in the building of Russian Empire, and expansion of its territory. Catherine the Great (reign 1762- 1796) was a great example of this achievement. Catherine I reigned (1725-1727), Anna Ioannovna 1730-1740, Elizabeth Petrovna (1741-1763), Maria Feodorovna (1881-1894) and Alexandra Feodorovna (1894-1917) were women rulers who have left indelible marks in Russian history. Catherine Breshkovsky, Vera Zasulich, Sophia Perovskaya, Nadezhda Krupskaya and Maria Spiridonova played pivotal role as revolutionist during the revolutionary period in Russia. These women exhibited uncommon bravery as revolutionist who brought down Russian Empire. Imperial government feature women in all spheres of Russian endeavours in major capacities including political, where women showcased their innate ability to optimise their potentials. Throughout the imperial period, Russian women have proven with history that they are forces that can be reckoned with.

Participation of women in the revolutionary wave that brought about the Great October revolution of 1917 was significant. Women were seriously involved in revolutionary movement which saw the notable organisation of women into political parties. Elena Stasova, Krupskaya, Iakovleva and Samoilova were elected among the leadership of the party Central Committee that led the Bolshevik in the Great October revolution (Frederiksen, 2017:32). Prior to October revolution, Russia was patriarchal as women were relegated into the background and considered as men property with exemption of the aristocrats. Men were permitted by Tsarist law to treat their wives more or less like slaves by beating (3).



Few females were educated while they were majorly restricted to double task of home chores and factory works (4). Thus, the Great October revolution was another milestone as regards the regression of women's political positions from major to nominal representations. In the Soviet period, women were portrayed as weak force in terms of political strength. But in reality, women were seen to have demonstrated high level of competence in different areas of endeavour. Sofia Kovalevskaya was famous for her record as the first European woman who bagged doctorate in mathematics and the first female to earn professorship in the same field. Anna Akhamatova was highly notable in the field of literature as she made the record of one of the greatest Russian poet and literature grants. Valentina Tereshkova made the first world record as a first woman to travel into the space, and neither was the activities of women lacking in political spheres. Despite the high level of literacy among Russian women during the period, they were restrained from attaining powerful positions in decision- making bodies (Usha, 2005:141).

Regardless of the fact that the constitutional laws were put in place by Soviet governments to protect women's right, the provision could not guarantee gender equality in terms of representation in political scene. Rather, the Soviet Union conserves a male-dominated culture which disempowered women from attaining political leadership positions (141).

In furtherance, the socio-political structure that saw Russian transition from socialism to democracy was equally hostile to women's needs to have greater representation in politics. The revival of the Church's role further strengthened the patriarchal and the traditional factors in Russian society. The transition of Russian from socialism to democracy, accompanied by political liberalism, turned out for many Russian women to lose their accomplishments during the Soviet era, including their quotas for political representations as they were challenged with increasing gender bigotry. The revalidation of the conservative idea of "Motherhood" as primary obligation of women and the patriarchal attitude also diverted women's attention from politics. So, the political positioning of women under the democratic Russian setting appears even worse than it was during the Soviet days. However, the political freedom allows women to join global feminist networks and participate in International conferences on women's issues.

## **2. WOMEN IN THE SOVIET POLITICS**

After the revolution of 1917, the new Soviet regime began to respond to protests of women in the wake of revolution to demand gender classless society by abolishing all laws that repress women freedom. The 1917 revolution which clashed with International Women's Day was used by women factory workers to fight for women's equality having reached the limit of tolerance of women chauvinism (Frederiksen, 2017:55).

A struggle to build a society free of oppression and inequality followed the victory of the Bolshevik that started the new soviet regime. In spite of the powerful political positions that women occupied during the pre-revolutionary Russia, the role of women during the Soviet period was significantly restricted. The aim of socialism which was informed by Marxism-Leninism ideology was to abolish all class structures which were to abolish all forms of inequality. So, Soviet was committed to the course of women emancipation on social, political and economic issues. All Soviet government throughout the Soviet regime, from Lenin to Gorbachev tried to create opportunities through constitutional legislations for increase women empowerment. Yet, Russian society was male dominated in the socialist context throughout the soviet period. Lenin's watchword after revolution was equality of all gender.

So, his reform was tailored towards protection of women's equality in all areas of life through all-inclusive legal protections. In the fifth All-Russian Congress of July 1918, the earliest period of the Soviet, women's new political rights was endorsed through Article 22 to guarantee equality of all Soviet Republic citizens regardless of sexual category (Usher, 2005:146). In spite of the efforts of the first Soviet to advance women's political participation during the Lenin's leadership, no women was able to make it to the politburo but were confined more to the local and regional levels throughout the regime. Only three women were members of the Central Committee in 1917 out of thirty-one members (148). The Stalin constitution of 1936 (Act 122) accorded to the women all rights on an equal footing with men in all spheres including political (Tay, 1972:668).



Notwithstanding, his policy from 1924 to 1953 was opposed to the classless society intended by the Soviet but rather created a hierarchical society that was dominated by a few privileged elite around the government (Usher, 2005:149). His government had no interest in women's equality with men, and so adopted the policy that restored male dominated society. For his priority in industrialisation and collectivisation of land, Stalin abolished the meeting of the women delegates which was initiated by Lenin to increase women's opportunities in political spheres, all political organisations and parties. The regime promoted a gender role model by recognising and awarding women that combined the roles of mother, housewife and worker as a "super woman" (148). This tactics diverted women's focus from politics to labour market, thus amounting at the Russian women constituting the highest rate of workforce in the world at the time (Usher, 2005:149). In spite of Stalin's indifference to equality based society, there was a steady increase in women's political activities which eventually earned them up to 25.8 percent, a high rate of representation of women in the Deputies of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union (Usher, 2005:149). Notwithstanding, women were restrained from attaining top political positions.

In 1956, Krushchev wanted to bridge the gap between women party membership of 19.5 percent and their lower representation in Central Committee in the ratio of 4.1 percent. So, the regime revived women's council to increase political consciousness among women. In spite of this measure, the ratio of percentage of women party membership and their representation in the Central Committee fell to 19.5 and 3.3 percent respectively. The Breshnev regime in 1970-1980 saw the rise of women's share in the Deputies of the Supreme Soviet varying from 25 – 33 percent. However, top political positions remained highly impregnable to women. The government featured only one woman in the Central Committee, no woman in the Politburo and political activism was limited mainly to the primary party level (150-151).

In Soviet days, there was a widespread acceptance of supposedly natural sex differences, followed by perceiving of a secondary position for women in all spheres as natural (Kapoor, 2006:60). Kapoor, equally asserts that "gender was always a key organising principle in the Soviet system, wherein masculinity was embodied within the State as the main provider", while women were expected to fulfill both roles as a worker and a mother (60). Involvement of women up to the stage of Supreme Soviet allowed for significant participation of female in the legislation during the soviet period. Towards the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was observed that there was a decline in women's political involvement. The 33 percent of the 1984 Supreme Soviet, the quota of women dropped to 70 percent in the 1989 Congress of People's Deputies. Also, despite 33 percent quota for women in the Supreme Soviet, there was a remarkable lack of women leaders at the higher echelons of the system (61). Semanova points to the fact that only two women were appointed as ministers between 1923 and 1991, with their total presence in Central Committee politburo at a mere 3 percent during the entire Soviet period (61).

The Central Statistical Office of the Soviet Ministry of the USSR of 1969 reported that the level of representation of women into the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in 1966 was 28 percent of the total number of deputies (Tay, 1972:682). Elected women in the Supreme Soviet of the Union and Autonomous Republic in 1967 constituted 34 percent of the total elected members at the territorial, regional and local level of workers' deputies, and women constituted 42.8 percent of the total representation (Tay, 1972:683). The calibers of these women among who are judges, doctors, engineers, scholars, and teachers are testimonial of the equal social status they maintained with men. In 1968, 32 percent of the Judges of the Soviet People's Court was made up of women, 35 percent advocates and women bailiffs are notably higher than men as they accounted for 56 percent (83). In some other government department and organs of justice, women acting in the head capacities were higher than men in number. In academic area, in 1967, 20 percent of all Associate Professors were women (683). The Stalin's constitution of 1936 which was still in use till this period more theoretically recognised the equality of women's right with men. The need to increase women's inclusion in labour force was considered, and so access to education and career, and legal guarantees of equality were given to them. However, the number of women in leadership areas mentioned above was not represented in political hierarchy because of restriction.



As Gorbachev's Glasnot and Perestroika policy of 1980s paved way for women's organisation to promote and defend their interests and campaigns against repression of women; such in the form of gender inequality, job discrimination, exclusion of women from decision-making level, and the over-labouring of women in domestic and official job was increased. Women were also able to organise under political organisation, civil society groups and non-governmental organisations. For a couple of reasons which include lengthened political opportunities and responsibilities, and the acknowledgment of the increasingly restriction of women in the Soviet society, Soviet Women Committee strived to develop a national plan. The women organisation was given seventy five in Gorbachev's Congress of People's Deputies and became major decision taker on women affairs.

One third of the seats in the congress of People's Deputies were held in reserve for both the communist party and official organisations. In 1990, Soviet Women Committee was separated from the state and formally transformed to voluntary union of Women's council and nongovernmental organisations and was renamed Union of Women of Russia (Racioppi & See, 1995:831). Paradoxically, his government practically revived the conservative principle of women's family roles and sought to bring them back to the state of motherhood (Usha, 2005:152). The decline of women representation continued to the post-Soviet period because the quota system was not introduced in Duma (Kapoor, 2006:61).

### 3. WOMEN IN RUSSIAN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

The emergence Russian State came with the transformation that altered the Russian women political stand. Considerate national and class inequality became resuscitated. Though the Russian constitution of 1993 supported gender equality, the neo-traditional gendered political discourses paradoxically put women's right at disadvantages. The post-Soviet market has objectified women as "trophies and servants to men". There was revisionism of the notion of feminism with the role of women redefined to domestic-bound, and feminism was then seen as negativity. High rate of unemployment among women became conspicuous. In effect, the liberalisation of Russia fostered a patriarchal, neo-traditional conception of gender relations, re-empowering men in the public sphere and promoting the role of women into the background. The Putin's regime has increased the objectification and regression of the role and status of women. He has assured the patriarchal position and has consolidated the pre-existing paternalistic structures of Russian society. Putin personification of a pastoral; leadership characterised by patriarchal concerns, the unconditional love, and a caring father has become part of his governing tactic and which seemingly is loudly resounding above his constitutional sovereign power (Hardwick, 2014:6).

Impression from his rhetoric in this respect appears not as an enforcement of a new custom but rather a conviction that penetrated into the veins of Russian people as a corrective to the abnormalities of gender equality tradition that have diffused into Russian social life. Putin's disposition has strengthened the position of male gender that has paternalistic responsibilities to be a pious father and husband (Hardwick, 2014:6). The Russian President has substantiated the gender difference principle with the institutionalisation of a new national holiday to celebrate the "Day of Family, Love and Fidelity" to be observed in June 8 (6).

The initiative by Putin has injected the mentality of male uncompetitive role as women protector. Moreover, the elevated positions of men in elite and professional hierarchy have institutionalised women marginalisation. Women's positions have been degraded to child bearing, domestic tools or even what we preferably describe here, as legal sexual object. This insinuation is bolstered by prenatalism; policies under Putin's regime to promote child bearing among women (7). The attitude that was transferred from the imperial Russian to the present time of Russian democratic system reflects no clear separation between politics and religion. Russian orthodoxy seems to be contiguous with its political and social interactions. Institutionalised gender predisposition in Putin's Russia is not excluded from the influence of Russian orthodox Christian nationalism which strongly oppose feminism philosophy (7)



The new Russia State stepped up in its effort in reducing female competition with male by objectifying woman for procreation using legislation measures against child birth controls among women either in the way of contraceptive or deliberate abortion (7). The roles of women in politics and business have been discredited by public discourse which emphasises the traditional principle of gendered power network which restrict women to domestic sphere (8). Some courageous women, who are not complacent about women restriction to home, have chosen to play roles underground to avoid public stigmatisation. Women's inclination for entrepreneurship and to make direct impact on Russian general aspect has been framed by the notion of social appropriation. Women behaviour is construed abnormal when they contest or compete in domains that are branded for men (8).

Women focuses are redirected to orthodoxy where they are taught how to live and make spiritual exploration, and to conserve Russian religious tradition. Andrew Mazzarino's research showed that opportunities for woman outright impact on Russian welfare policies, the media and other entrepreneur sphere are significantly scanty (8). Women professional are put on watch-list of the Justice Ministry with the promulgation of 2006 non-Governmental Organisation law intended to monitor organisations that are anti-Putin (65). Women are challenged with series of civil compliances which include restriction of activity of women rights movement, such as the curbing or curtailing of women protest, media independence and obligation to account for foreign fund to Russian authorities (66). There was a retrenchment of Women's Crisis Centres which had existed since 1990 to promote women's welfare and right against gender violence. Few notable women and women journalists whose intellect and professionalism influence the society are targeted for their efforts in defending women rights (9)

Russia's Putin regime is a gender-biased one that increased the perception of male genders status over the women. Putin's apathy for feminism returned the women to the old patriarchal order to simply limit their tasks to motherhood and family caretaker (10).

Emergence of independent Russian State was accompanied with neglect of women into the position of power (Nechemial, 2000:1). Only few women are included in the structure of power. Subsequent to the demise of USSR, political participation of women is challenging. The women have unequal participation and representation in contemporary Russian society. Levels of women's participation in policy making since the emergence of Russian Federation is on steady decline. The decline of women representation in the parliament is contrast with the gradual increase of women representation during the Soviet regime (Rocha nd.,1). The number of women in the Soviet era dropped significantly from the average of 30 percent to only about 5 percent representation under the Russian Federation council, and 13 percent in the State Duma (Rocha, nd., 2).

At the earlier period of the emergence of the new Russian Federation in 1990s, composite party women of Russia gained popularity that earned women the majority in Duma in the 1993 elections. But the party became divided making them to fail winning 5 percent threshold requirement for participation in the 1995 election. The ratio of women in Federal public service in the transition to Russian State was over 65 percent of all public servants. Yet, the new Russian political system is dominated by men (Rocha, nd., 2).

The present political atmosphere in Russia reflects a departure from soviet's situation. The elements that are responsible for the challenges of women in the contemporary Russia had its root from the soviet legacy. In spite of the high level of women literacy during the soviet time, their political representation and workforce participation, women who held political power are more of figure heads because they had little influence in decision making at the local, republic and all-union level ((Rocha, nd., 3). The real decision-making power was concentrated more in the Central Committee and the male dominated bureaucracy. The Russian State democracy followed the same trend of minimal female participation (Rocha, nd., 3). The contemporary Russia's position reflects a backlash against soviet ideals of women's emancipation and equality.



Russia's democracy now portrays women as unnaturally over-emancipated. The females are now more involved in sectors that are traditionally associated with women, such as social protection and the family. The uncertain nature of Russian democracy is also a key factor accounting for lack of women's involvement in politics. For lack of opportunity for independent organisation during the Soviet regime, women political structures are not on ground to be consolidated. And so, more time is required for women to mobilise women to fully participate in the new democracy ((Rocha, nd., 3). In contrast to the Soviet's focus on gender relations and the role of women, in the contemporary Russian Federation, gender has not played a prominent role in political organisation. The State policy sets targets for female participation in the political bodies throughout the 1990s, but any initial activity has diminished in the past decade. The gender strategy of the Russian Federation is yet to be approved, and the lack of gender related policy activity reflects both the current lack of government interest.

The transition period from soviet to Russian Federation also came with transition of women's political status. Political participation and representation of women is challenged as they have no influential positions in decision making process. Though, the Russian democratic system allows for multiparty, demographic factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity play important role in electoral process. The gender gap is noticed in the elections that have taken place since 1993. The only 8 percent of vote won by women in the 1993 election came from women only. In 1996-1999, women formed only 3.2 percent of Russia's federal assembly, but only one woman was in the federation council. (Sechin, 2014:3).

In the late 1980s, and early 1990s, women regularly held one-third of the seats in the supreme Soviets before Gorbachev regime. However, the decision making process was implemented in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, rather than the Supreme Soviet. The Central Committee of the Communist Party had less than 5 percent of women deputies (Seckin, 2014:4). The social and economic transformations in Russia in 1999-2003 promoted multi-party democracy and which has been directly reflected on women's status.

In the election of 2003, approximately 15 percent of the members who won election into the Russian Federation parliament were women as against the 1999 election which earned women only 8 percent. Women candidates were nominated by all the political parties that participated in the election. The increase of women inclusion in this year was informed by the focus work and series of sensitisation projects that were put in place. In 2001, a Federal law called "On political parties", which was to provide for women's participation in politics on the basis of equal rights was adopted. Also, the activities of women's leadership schools was organised by non-Government Organisation, the parliamentary hearing were conducted on the bill known as "On State guarantees of equal rights and freedoms for men and women and opportunities for their realisation in the Russian Federation", and the bill gained the support of the Russian government (United Nations General Assembly, 2000, 1).

The transition in Russia from Soviet period to Federalism was also a milestone as regards the influence of Russian women in its policies. Involvement of women up to the stage of Supreme Soviet allowed for significant participation of female in the legislation (during the soviet period). The dissolution of the soviet led to drastic decline. The 33 percent of the 1984 Supreme Soviet, the quota of women dropped to 70 percent in the 1989 congress of People's Deputies (Kapoor, 2006:61). The decline of women representation continued to the post-Soviet period because the quota system was not introduced in Duma (61). Women representation was affected due to the system of representation that remains fluctuating. For example, from 1993 till 2003, representation in the Russian Lower House was based on dual system of Proportional Representation and Single Membership District. In 1993, out of 450 seats in the Duma, women occupied 60 seats (13.5%), 46 seats (10.5%) in 1995, 34 seats (7.7%) in 1999 and 44 seats (9.8) in 2003. The dual system was amended before 2007, while the election process was based on Proportional Representation only. In 2007 election, women occupied 63 seats (14%) and 61 seats (13.6%) in 2011 (61). The above statistics shows that there is no significant improvement in women representation in Duma since 1993. The highest representation is perennially minimal compared to men.



The resuscitation of conservative system and patriarchy affected the numbers of female presence in the labour market, resulting in inability of women to form a strong political force (62). The report of the World Economic Forum on gender gap in economic, education, health and politics in 2006 showed that Russia was behind at the level of women political empowerment. Russia fell in the rank of 108 out of 115 countries that were scored (65). Despite the Russian economic clout as the 10<sup>th</sup> largest global economy by GDP, the country lags behind in the aspect of women representation in comparison to other nations with such economic parity. The representation of women results from the cultural factors where there is a popular belief that men are better political leaders than women. This assertion was evident from both the survey of the “World Values Survey” which covers 2010-2014 and another public opinion in 1999. The report of World Values Survey revealed that about 57 percent agreed that are better in political leadership than women (69). This attitude can be adduced to the conservative trend in Soviet Russia which accentuates the patriarchal role of men over the women.

Religion influence also impacts the women decline in political sphere. The orthodox Christianity is experiencing a revival in Russian State especially among the younger age group and the well educated people. Many Orthodox Christians are seeing the Soviet and Western idea of equality as being antagonistic to Orthodoxy Christian values and destructive to Russian (Kizenko, 2013:595). Aside the priests, women constitute the largest number of church attendant in Russian State. They are more engaged in writing and editing religious publication and feature prominently in media coverage in the post-Soviet era (616). Additionally, Russian orthodoxy promotes values, practices and social policies that put women in a subordinate position (595).

Women only made up 13 percent in Duma following 2012 national election and only 6 percent at the Federal level. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) ranked Russia as one of the countries where women participation is low. Apart from the imperial Russia, the Soviet Union and the present Russian Federation have not been ruled by a female either as Prime Minister or President. Women have been found in many countries today being position at parity with men in terms of political leadership. For example, Sahle-Work Zewde (Zimbabwe), Theresa May (UK), Tsai Lng-Wen (Republic of China), Angela Merkel (Germany), Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia), Sheik Hasina (Bangladesh) and Dalia Grybauskaite.

However, the recent report of the World Economic Forum raises hope of future political competition between Russian men and women. According to WEF’s “Insight Report” on The Global Gender Gap (2017), there is a significant close of global gender gap in 2017, standing at 68 percent, and remaining only 32 percent to achieve universal gender parity. The report showed that 2016 election produced more women in government as they constituted around 16 percent of Russian Deputies, Senators and Ministers in Russia’s 31-member Cabinet.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In the hey days of the Russian Empire, in spite of the fact that Russia Empire was patriarchal as women were not placed on equal footing with men, both men and women, played powerful or prominent roles as Tsars and Empresses of the Russian Empire. The prerevolutionary period also saw decisive involvements of women, who were not aristocrats, in revolutionary movements that led the Bolshevik to victory in the Great October revolution. However, the Soviet regime typified significant repression of women’s political positions. In spite of the various constitutional policies that were adopted by different governments throughout the Soviet period, the political orb of Soviet government was male-hegemonic. Political participations and representations of women were challenged as they have no influential positions in decision making process. The same trend continues with the transition of Russia from socialism to democracy. Russian State under Putin is averse to the principle of feminism which seeks to advance women’s social equality, but instead resuscitated the conservative principle of class society that promotes masculinity in the context of political leadership.



History has shown that though women have continuously enjoyed more political activities and organisation into political parties from the Soviet time till the present time, women held better authoritative positions during the Tsarist period than both the Soviet and Russian Federation democratic era. It is therefore suggested that Russian women should imitate other European countries that are ruled by women, and remain unflappable in their struggle for gender equality and to use the global feminist networks and International conferences on women's issues to consolidate their ambitions for substantial political inclusion.

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