

# Gender Issues in Russia

by Marina Pisklakova-Parker

## ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in the Russian Federation has been growing in the past few years due to the lack of a clear state policy addressing the problem and a rise in propaganda of so-called “traditional values”, which are patriarchal attitudes towards role division for women and men. This has resulted in the increased vulnerability of women, including the growth of violence against women, discrimination at work and lack of opportunities in politics. As the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated, this patriarchal role division has made women even more vulnerable, doubling their load of household work and increasing domestic violence. Women’s organisations are at the forefront of providing services to victims of violence, educating the public and advocating for change. The recent so-called “special operation” in Ukraine has also demonstrated that women in Russia are actively protesting, organising themselves to help the Ukrainian people and building resistance.

*Russia | Women | Coronavirus | NGOs | Domestic policy*

**keywords**

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by Marina Pisklakova-Parker\*

## 1. Women in Russia

Article 19 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation states that: 1. Everyone is equal before the law and the court; 2. The state guarantees the equality of human and civil rights and freedoms regardless of *gender*, race, nationality, language, origin, property and official status, place of residence, attitude to religion, beliefs, membership in public associations, as well as other circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

In the past few years, gender equality in Russia has been declining according to the Global Gender Gap Index ranking published by the World Economic Forum, where Russia moved down from 75th to 81st place.<sup>2</sup>

What is more, according to the scorecard published by the “Women, Business and Law” Project of the World Bank, Russia scores 73.1 out of 100, which is lower than the average regional score of 84.1 observed across Europe and Central Asia.<sup>3</sup>

Gender discrimination in Russia is officially recognised to a certain extent in such areas as the labour market, political participation and career advancement, but it is denied in the family area, in situations of violence against women and in the reproductive sphere.

<sup>1</sup> Russian Government website: *Constitution of the Russian Federation*, <http://archive.government.ru/eng/gov/base/54.html>. Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, December 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law Economy Snapshots: Russian Federation*, March 2022, <https://wbl.worldbank.org/content/dam/documents/wbl/2022/snapshots/Russian-federation.pdf>.

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Some of the main problems for women in Russia are the following:

- Wages: Women's wages are 28 per cent less than those of men for the same type of employment;<sup>4</sup>
- Safety: According to statistics from the national helpline of the ANNA Center, domestic violence is on the rise especially since it has been decriminalised, in addition to sexualised violence and sexual harassment;<sup>5</sup>
- The feminisation of poverty: Single mothers are still one of the poorest population groups, and are not socially and financially protected; single women take maternity leave; women with young children are reluctant to work; and women often do not receive career promotion due to a biased attitude to motherhood as an unstable labour force;<sup>6</sup>
- Gender stereotypes and sexism: Women are forced to reckon with the "norm" and "special women's duty" dictated by society instead of focusing on their actual tendencies and talents.<sup>7</sup>

However, gender discrimination cannot exist merely in selective areas, as it is a systemic characteristic of the gender order. In modern Russian society, both ordinary citizens and those who make decisions at the state level are subject to the influence of the most common (traditional) gender stereotypes, which leads to contradictions in social policy. The patriarchal renaissance observed in Russia and the consolidation of existing gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes in the public mind has a significant impact on the persistence and indeed growth of gender inequality.

At the same time, gender stereotypes and practices are promoted by the Orthodox church and by the state in the form of public calls for the preservation of so-called traditional family values, which in essence are the household rules (*domostroy*) formulated in the 15th century. This is an attempt to replace the achievements in equality gained during the Soviet period with rigid rules that were created 500 years ago, thereby increasing the vulnerability of women. The approach is visible in different areas from family life to labour rights, to reproductive health, to the political participation of women. Sometimes discrimination is explained by motives of "care for women".

For example, as of 2021, women are again allowed to work as train drivers in the subway. In the Moscow Metro, women have been driving electric trains since 1936, but in the early 1980s, a ban was introduced on hiring new female employees in

<sup>4</sup> "Study: Women in Russia Earn 28% Less than Men with the Same Qualifications" [in Russian], in *Tass*, 14 May 2020, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8468883>.

<sup>5</sup> ANNA Center, *Half-Year Results: Almost 30,000 Applications* [in Russian], 7 July 2021, <https://anna-center.ru/tpost/725d55y1f1-itogi-polugodiya-pochti-30-tisyach-obras>.

<sup>6</sup> NAFI Research Centre, *Stereotypes about Women and Their Consequences. On the Path to Equal Opportunities in the Digital Economy*, May 2020, <https://nafi.ru/en/projects/sotsialnoe-razvitiie/stereotipy-v-otnoshenii-zhenshchin-i-ikh-posledstviya>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

this specialty. This was explained by the protection of women's health against high loads and adverse labour factors.

Gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes/traditions play the most important role in maintaining and perpetuating gender inequality in all spheres, especially in the family. Gender stereotypes not only produce gender inequality, but also support it, reinforce and justify it. They form gender asymmetry within family relations – as such, the family constitutes an institutional basis for the reproduction of gender relations in society. The presence of gender discrimination in the family is evidenced by the fact that women still invest more time, emotional and other types of resources in unpaid housework, childcare and maintaining family ties than men do. It is in the family sphere that the idea of equality between men and women has the most difficulty in penetrating.

The research results show that a fairly large proportion of the Russian population is committed to traditional gender stereotypes. According to a study conducted by the NAFI analytical centre in May–June 2019 with the support of Google and the Council of the Eurasian Women's Forum:

- 71 per cent of Russians share the opinion that the main purpose of a woman is to be a mother and a good housewife.
- 89 per cent of women believe that a man should provide for his family, and only 45 per cent agree with the statement that a woman should provide for herself.
- Although 55 per cent of married Russians note that the most responsible decisions in their families are made jointly by husband and wife, in 29 per cent of families these decisions are made only by a man, and in just 15 per cent by a woman.
- 32 per cent of Russians believe that a woman should choose between a career and a family, and this point of view is more common among those who have children.<sup>8</sup>

One area where women remain most vulnerable is in the family. This is based on persistent gender stereotypes, the influence of which was especially evident during the period of Covid-19 lockdown in Russia from March to May 2020. The results of the all-Russian study "Gender Aspects of the Socio-Demographic Dynamics of Modern Russia" conducted in April 2020 by the Institute for Socio-Economic Problems of Population of the Federal Research Sociological Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ISEPN FNISTs RAS) show that almost two-thirds of the respondents (64 per cent) share the opinion that the family is the main area of women's self-realisation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Marina Pisklakova-Parker and Olga Efanova, "The Influence of Gender Stereotypes on the Growth of Gender Inequality and Domestic Violence in Russia in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic", in *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 11 (November 2021), p. 32, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss11/4>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33. The survey was conducted at the end of April 2020. The sample size was 600 people aged 18 years and older. Residents of 73 constituent entities of the Russian Federation were surveyed.

**Table 1** | The opinions of men and women regarding the main role of women (%)

<b>Do you personally agree with the statement that women should give a priority to taking care of their families, not their careers?</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes	70.5	58.4	64.0
No	29.5	41.6	36.0

Source: Marina Pisklakova-Parker and Olga Efanova, "The Influence of Gender Stereotypes on the Growth of Gender Inequality and Domestic Violence in Russia in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic", cit., p. 34.

As the data in the table above demonstrate, this gender stereotype is more deeply accepted by men than by women: among men this stereotype is shared by more than two-thirds of the respondents, while the share of its supporters is slightly more than half among female respondents. Thus, it is clear that men are more likely to identify themselves with the role of a breadwinner compared with women, who do not see themselves as only homemakers, which is most likely due to modern conditions in which women perform both functions.

Further, the results of the all-Russian survey "Assessment of the Socio-Demographic Consequences of the Pandemic" with 2,400 respondents conducted in 2021 by the ISEPN FNISTs RAS show that 36.5 per cent of respondents believe that the family budget should be formed by men and women equally, 33.6 per cent think this should be done by men, and 26.7 per cent of respondents note that the formation of the family budget should depend on which of the spouses has a more successful career.

The data obtained show that mothers spend more time on all household chores under consideration than all other members of the family. In addition, they devote more time to caring for children (93.2 per cent) and cooking (90.6 per cent). Fathers are more likely to help children in their studies (21.1 per cent) and take care of older family members (14.5 per cent). Daughters and sons also take care of older family members (9.3 and 4.5 per cent respectively).<sup>10</sup>

During the pandemic, according to the participants of the study, mothers also spend more time on household chores than other family members: they devote more time to caring for children (85.1 per cent), cooking (83.3 per cent) and cleaning the house (82.2 per cent). Fathers most often help children with their studies (20.8 per cent), take care of older family members (12.8 per cent) and cook (10.4 per cent). During the pandemic, daughters and sons take care of older family members the most (7.6 and 3.5 per cent, respectively).

<sup>10</sup> The survey was conducted in October 2021. The sample size was 2,400 people aged 18 years and older. Residents of 73 constituent entities of the Russian Federation were surveyed.

Most respondents (86.8 per cent) indicated that the distribution of household chores in their family during the pandemic has not changed; however, in general, 82.3 per cent of them are satisfied with this distribution (42.6 per cent are quite satisfied, 39.6 per cent are rather satisfied). Among those respondents in whose households there was a change in the distribution of household duties (13.2 per cent), men began to devote more time to household chores (61.9 per cent). In total, 63.6 per cent of respondents would not like to change the current distribution of responsibilities (38.2 per cent would rather not, 25.4 per cent would definitely not).

The situation concerning discrimination against women within the family, which is based on existing gender stereotypes, is a reflection of broader systemic discrimination within the society, as reflected also in women's political participation.

## 2. Political participation of women

Currently, women make up 16 per cent of the State Duma in Russia. The main issue is not with the number of women but rather with gender-sensitivity levels of men and women in power because this is what defines policies and legislation mainstreamed in Russia. Unfortunately, "gender" is considered to be a taboo word, alongside the strengthening of a "traditional values" discourse centred around God and traditional family values (marriage of a man and a woman) in the Constitution. It is important to remember that in general the level of gender awareness in Russia is still quite low, which is reflected in politics and evident through statistics.

According to the recent Levada-Center survey of 2022,<sup>11</sup> 66 per cent of respondents agree that women should be able to hold the highest political positions in the state equally to men. This represents an increase compared to results of a similar survey conducted in 2017 (31 per cent). At the same time, 76 per cent of respondents in 2022 generally approved of women's political participation, which is up from 37 per cent in 2017. Another interesting fact is that women support female politicians more than men do – 45 per cent versus 27 per cent.

**Table 2** | Do you approve of women's participation in politics? (%)

	Total	Male	Female
Definitely yes	37	27	45
Rather yes	39	40	38
Rather not	13	18	9
Definitely not	9	12	6
Difficult to answer	3	4	2

<sup>11</sup> Levada-Center, "Gender Equality, Participation of Women in Political Life" [in Russian], in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=27698>.

**Table 3** | Do you think that in modern Russia women have more or fewer rights and opportunities than men? (%)

	Total	Male	Female
More rights and opportunities	10	11	9
The same	68	72	64
Fewer than men	20	15	25
Find it difficult to answer	2	2	2

Source: Levada-Center, "Gender Equality, Participation of Women in Political Life", cit.

As is visible from the data above, the change is mainly happening among women. They want to see a change in politics by bringing in more women, hoping that this will allow for more rights and opportunities as well as more safety and security.

### 3. Domestic violence against women during and after the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in 2020 has affected the whole world and all aspects of society. At the same time, the manifestations of the pandemic have affected different groups of the population in different ways. For example, income inequality has affected opportunities to live in isolation, and access to quality food and medicines. The pandemic has exacerbated and thereby highlighted the problems of gender inequality in the world. A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) technical brief notes that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequalities for women, worsening their already precarious situation around the world. Women have become one of the most vulnerable groups due to a combination of various factors. For instance, most medical personnel are women.<sup>12</sup> In Russia, more than 71 per cent of doctors and over 95 per cent of nursing staff (according to the Ministry of Health) are women. This means that it is women who are often the first to meet infected people.<sup>13</sup>

Another significant negative consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially the self-isolation/lockdown regime which manifested gender discrimination in the family, should be recognised as the increase in domestic violence. According to the results of the all-Russian survey "Gender Aspects of the Socio-Demographic Dynamics of Modern Russia" conducted in April 2020 by the ISEPN FNISTs RAS, almost a fifth (16.8 per cent) of respondents noted an increase in cases of domestic

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *COVID-19: A Gender Lens. Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Promoting Gender Equality*, New York, UNFPA, March 2020, <https://www.unfpa.org/node/23972>.

<sup>13</sup> "The Ministry of Health Told How Many Women Work as Doctors in Public Medical Institutions" [in Russian], in *Tass*, 5 October 2021, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/12578787>.

violence, mainly (62.3 per cent of all cases of domestic violence known to the respondents) against women.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the cycle and patterns of domestic violence allowed us to predict not only a further increase in numbers of domestic violence cases but also an increase in severe violence in a short period of time due to the following facts: (a) While in lockdown or self-isolation, women and children are likely to be spending concentrated periods of time with perpetrators, escalating the threat of domestic violence; (b) violence feeds on isolation, which makes it much easier for a perpetrator to execute his control, and (c) in a forced lockdown and isolation the cycle of violence will be shrinking in time quite rapidly, that will make each following episode more severe – and emotional, mental and financial abuse could turn physical.

During the lockdown starting in March of 2020, it became quickly evident that an increase in domestic violence against women was inevitable. It is a recognised factor that domestic violence thrives on isolation, and lockdown became an ideal situation for perpetrators of violence – in combination with a lack of an adequate state response system comprising legislation, definition of domestic violence, restraining and protective orders, and sufficient shelters. The Russian Human Rights Commissioner Tatiana Moskalkova publicly stated that since 10 April 2020 the number of domestic violence cases had more than doubled from 6,054 to about 13,000 per month.<sup>15</sup>

Contrastingly, the Ministry of Interior released a statement on 14 May 2020 that the number of domestic crimes had decreased by 9 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. Women's organisations explain this discrepancy by the lack of an effective system of response to domestic violence.<sup>16</sup>

During the lockdown, the law enforcement agencies focused their efforts mostly on control over compliance with stay-at-home orders and they abandoned their other duties; some shelters were placed under quarantine, and the court system was not functioning. In the situation of decriminalisation of domestic violence and lack of law aimed at protecting victims, there are no legal provisions for establishing a state system of response to domestic violence (including civil remedies like protection orders, etc.). As a result, victims of domestic violence were left totally unprotected.

<sup>14</sup> The survey was conducted at the end of April 2020. The sample size was 600 people aged 18 years and older. Residents of 73 constituent entities of the Russian Federation were surveyed.

<sup>15</sup> "Tatyana Moskalkova: Domestic Violence Has Increased During Self-Isolation" [in Russian], in *RIA Novosti*, 5 May 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200505/1570953246.html>; "Russian Ombudswoman Says Domestic Violence Surges Amid Coronavirus Restrictions", in *RFE/RL*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/30593947.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Alina Adyrkhaeva, "Patriarchy vs Coronavirus: Pandemic as a Chance to Close the Gender Gap" [in Russian], in *RBC Trends*, 5 March 2021, <https://trends.rbc.ru/trends/social/5ed8d6e39a79478c64bfa534>.



State response to domestic violence cases was also interrupted due to quarantine. There were reports of women forced to flee their homes under quarantine because of domestic violence but they had no place to go because state shelters require documents that are hard to obtain and some shelters were closed.

On 2 April 2020, seven leading Russian NGOs working with victims of domestic violence (ANNA Center, Zona Prava, the Consortium of Women's Non-governmental Organisations, Russia Legal Initiative, You Are Not Alone Network, the Sisters Centre and the Kitezh Centre) appealed to the Russian government for the maintenance of shelters and other forms of state regulations.<sup>17</sup> However, the government has not provided any response to the call.

In July 2020 the same group of women's organisations wrote a joint report on the situation of domestic violence under the lockdown. In the report, NGOs provided evidence of increased demand from survivors for NGO services during the lockdown. For example, the number of calls to the ANNA Center National Helpline grew by 74 per cent from March to May 2020, and 69.5 per cent of women who called the helpline reported a rapid escalation of violence during the lockdown.

The insufficiency in response to domestic violence during the lockdown was predictable based on well-known factors like the decriminalisation of physical assault in intimate relationships in 2017. In the fall of 2016, a member of the upper chamber of the Parliament, Elena Mizulina, wrote a proposal suggesting the decriminalisation of violence in private relationships. The initiative was supported by other members of both chambers of the Parliament and went to a vote in January 2017. It became law in February 2017 after being signed by the President. Decriminalisation not only became dangerous to the safety of thousands of Russian women suffering from domestic violence, but this decision has sent a message that the state doesn't consider familial battery a criminal offense and a violation of women's human rights. Decriminalisation was a signal that domestic abuse is not a serious issue, and inevitably it gives perpetrators a greater sense of impunity. This reverse in the legislation came in combination with a number of other factors in the current situation in Russia: (a) the conservative wave against gender equality at the state level; (b) promotion of conservative religious views both by some ultra-conservative groups like "Parental Movement" and by certain state officials; (c) the defence of domestic violence as a part of "traditional values" on the part of ultra-conservative groups and as well as some state officials; and (d) increasing pressure on civil society (Foreign Agent law).

Cycles of domestic violence that were launched during the lockdown continue to be reproduced without state intervention at legislative and service levels. In 2021 the number of calls to the National Helpline of the ANNA Center reached 58,180,

<sup>17</sup> Valeria Mishina, Maria Litvinova and Yana Rozhdestvenskaya, "Domestic Violence Becomes Contagious" [in Russian], in *Kommersant*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4310901>.

and after the first quarter of 2021, the total was already 29,149.<sup>18</sup>

It is possible to forecast further growth in violence against women in Russia, especially domestic violence, due to several factors:

- The wave of violence launched during the Covid-19 lockdowns will continue to unfold because it is the nature of cycles of violence to reproduce themselves if not interrupted, which requires an external system of support for survivors;
- Expansion of conservative anti-women's rights propaganda through the "traditional values" concept;
- Lack of a system of response to different forms of violence against women and girls in Russia, including the absence of a law defining domestic violence, problems in addressing harmful practices, etc.;
- The current war in Ukraine not only has affected women but will lead to an increase in violence in the future.

The feminist movement in Russia has been changing through the past decades due to different external and internal factors contributing to its development. The movement countering violence against women began as part of the women's movement in the early 1990s with the first Crisis Centres for women in Moscow (ANNA Center and Centre Sisters), Saint-Petersburg (Women's Crisis Centre, and a shelter for women), Irkutsk (Crisis Centre for women), Nizhniy Tagil (Centre Lana) and Yekaterinburg (Centre Yekaterina). The first joint action of those organisations was a 1995 report about violence against women in Russia delivered to the Special Rapporteur on violence against women at the Beijing Conference.

In the latest decade of development of the women's movement, starting in 2012–13, activists and NGOs have continued to employ the ideas and methods of struggle characterised by the previous years of activism but have taken them further thanks to technological progress and new methods of disseminating information, for example actively using social networks. Feminist organisations create crisis centres, provide legal services, establish private shelters and disseminate women's human rights information.

Now the movement against violence against women also exists in the form of the informal National Network of about 150 state and non-governmental organisations coordinated by the ANNA Center, which was listed under the Foreign Agent law in 2016.<sup>19</sup> There are also regional networks in some regions of Russia that are part of the National Network. Currently, women's NGOs are the main resource of support for survivors of domestic violence, but it is hard to predict how many organisations will be able to stay in action under the current circumstances.

<sup>18</sup> ANNA Center, *Results of 2021: Almost 60,000 Applications* [in Russian], 10 January 2022, <https://anna-center.ru/tpost/i057ki9ri1-itogi-2021-goda-pochti-60-tisyach-obrasce>; ANNA Center, *The Founder of ANNA Center Received an International Award* [in Russian], 6 December 2021, <https://anna-center.ru/tpost/xzvz3tztz1-osnovatel'nitsa-tsentra-anna-poluchila-me>.

<sup>19</sup> ANNA Center website: *National Network* [in Russian], <https://anna-center.ru/nacionalnaya-set>.

The latest development demonstrates that the women's movement in Russia is taking a strong position against the special military operation in Ukraine; one of the most vivid examples is Feminist Anti-war Resistance (FAS), which is a growing movement of activists.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

In the past several years the challenges for women in the Russian Federation have increased due to a number of factors:

- Lack of state policy to address gender inequality. In 2017 the government adopted a concept of social development in the interest of women.<sup>21</sup> But this has been realised only partially and does not have a clear plan and budget associated with it.
- Growing propaganda of "traditional values" that focus on women's main role as mothers and a duty to have children.
- Growing pressure on women's organisations through "Foreign Agent" legislation.

On the other hand, the women's movement in Russia is growing in solidarity, becoming more professional and organising itself in better resistance to the increasing pressure.

*Updated 28 June 2022*

<sup>20</sup> Paul Goble, "Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAS) Leads in Organizing Russian Protests Against Putin's War – OpEd", in *Eurasia Review*, 29 April 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/?p=294175>.

<sup>21</sup> Russian Government, Order No. 410-r of 8 March 2017: *National Action Strategy for Women 2017-2022*, <http://static.government.ru/media/files/njlkIvH7WCvOIYRmcucV4jdNihEmTOUe.pdf>.

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