

February 13, 1997

To: DRL - Steve Coffey

From: DRL - George Lister *2*

Subject: Russian Women's Status

At noon yesterday I attended a George Washington Univ. meeting on "Russian Women's Status, in the Past and Today". The speaker was Visiting Professor Irina Akimushkina, of Russia. Dr. Akimushkina also teaches at Trinity College and was a Fulbright scholar at Maryland Univ. She is a strong advocate of women's rights but feels progress will not be easy. Just a few of her opening comments are very briefly summarized below.

This is a very hard time for Russian women. The transition to a market economy has cost many women their jobs. They are usually the first to be fired, and the last to be promoted. About 80% of women in Moscow are unemployed. But most families simply cannot exist with just one bread winner. Under the Soviet dictatorship money was less important than Party status and privilege. Now many families cannot afford to separate after divorce. And few Russian husbands provide much help at home.

During the question period I referred to the enormous progress achieved by the international human rights movement around the world in recent years, and I asked Dr. Akimushkina whether Russian women's rights advocates were working closely with such organizations as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. She felt there was little contact thus far. We agreed to stay in touch.

Two relevant pages from our latest Human Rights Report on Russia are attached.

cc: John Shattuck, Gare Smith, Wendy Silverman  
EUR/RUS - G - Theresa Loar



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In June President Yeltsin signed a decree entitled "On Certain Measures of State Support for the Human Rights Movement in the Russian Federation," which called for a high degree of coordination between federal structures and the human rights community. Specific measures laid out in the decree included the creation of three entities: an interregional human rights center to coordinate human rights activities; a human rights training center; and a center publishing human rights literature. Regional administrations were instructed to establish bodies analogous to the federal Human Rights Commission. The human rights group Memorial reported that no action has been taken on this decree.

By year's end, the Parliament had not approved a law establishing a human rights ombudsman. This position is provided for in the Constitution and is a condition for membership in the Council of Europe, which admitted Russia as a member in February.

In July President Yeltsin established by decree a Political Consultative Council (PCC) to assist in the creation of a legal framework for economic and political reforms with 12 standing chambers, including a human rights chamber, headed by Duma Deputy Valeriy Borshchev, and a legal chamber, headed by Boris Zolotukhin, a former Duma deputy. The PCC meets monthly. The Human Rights Chamber includes representatives of the various Duma factions as well as 10 members of the human rights NGO community. The Chamber has held hearings on issues such as prison reform and has proposed legislation on a death penalty moratorium to comply with Russia's obligations to the Council of Europe.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion,  
Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on race, sex, religion, language, social status, or other circumstances. However, both official and societal discrimination still exist.

Women

Domestic violence remains a major problem, as victims rarely have recourse to protection from the authorities. Police are frequently reluctant or even unwilling to involve themselves in what they see as domestic disputes. Many women are deterred from reporting such crimes because of this and because the housing system makes it difficult either to find housing outside the family dwelling or to expel an abusive spouse, even after a final divorce action.

During the first 6 months of 1996, there were 46,000 rapes reported in Moscow, an increase over the first 6 months of 1995. The MVD estimated that 80 percent of violent crime



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occurred in the home. Hospitals and members of the medical profession provide assistance to women who have been assaulted. However, some doctors are reluctant to ascertain the details of a sexual assault, fearing that they will be required to spend long periods in court. Human Rights Watch criticized the Government for failing to provide guidelines for improving police response to violence or to call for the adoption of a domestic violence law.

There is credible evidence that women encounter considerable discrimination in employment. At a Duma-sponsored roundtable held on March 5, representatives of 53 women's associations appealed to the Duma to improve the legal status of women by creating a council to assess all draft legislation to ensure that it provided for equal opportunities for women and men. In their appeal to the Duma, the women's associations' representatives raised their concerns that women form a disproportionately high percentage (62 percent) of the officially registered unemployed, that women are discriminated against in hiring and firing, that the differences between the salaries of men and women have increased sharply, and that few women attain senior positions. In March the Public Opinion Fund released a poll that indicated that the higher the income bracket, the lower the proportion of women. Women made up 87 percent of the employed urban residents with a personal income of less than \$21 (100,000 rubles) a month and only 32 percent of those earning more than \$315 (1.5 million rubles) a month.

Human Rights Watch accused the Government of participating in discriminatory actions against women, contending that the Government seldom enforces employment laws concerning women. Employers prefer to hire men, thereby saving on maternity and child care costs, and avoiding the perceived unreliability that accompanies the hiring of women with small children. In July a change in the Labor Code went into effect prohibiting women between the ages of 15 and 49 from being hired for jobs that are considered to be harmful to their health, including working on the night shift. Many of these jobs pay more, allow early retirement, or both.

In an April survey of female trade unionists conducted by the Institute of Free Trade Unions, 20 percent of respondents reported that they were aware of female workers in their enterprises being more frequently assigned to the lowest paid work, and 28 percent said that women were more frequently laid off or placed on involuntary leave. In the same survey, 16 percent said that women were less likely to be promoted, that women with young children were the first to be dismissed, and that women were not paid the same wage for the same work (as their male coworkers). Almost 14 percent of respondents considered that their enterprises shortchanged female workers on benefits, including maternity leave, exemption from night shifts, and other benefits.