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RWN
Russian Women as Immigrants in *Norden*
- Finland, Norway, Sweden -
Gender Perspectives on Everyday Life, Citizenship and Social Justice
(2004-2007)

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SUMMARY

Themes and main results

RWN was a comparative inquiry into the life and experiences of Russian women as immigrants in the Nordic Barents region after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The problematic was approached through the framework of structures, culture and agency - three 'prisms' composed of three disciplines and three topical problems and issues, as follows:

- 1) Everyday life (Kerstin Hägg, sociology)
- 2) Social justice and cultural recognition (Jana Sverdljuk, social philosophy)
- 3) Citizenship and participation (Aino Saarinen, political science)

Violence against women in its multiple forms was explored as being intertwined with the issues. In the final instance, RWN provided critical insights into Nordic migration, welfare and equality regimes.

To lay stress on women's self-definitions, women from Russia were theme-interviewed both a) individually (21) and through b) eight group discussions (38). To grasp the encounters with Nordic institutions and other-definitions from the side of the majorities, c) experts i.e. Russian women immigrants (7) and d) native persons (21) active in public and civic organisations were theme-interviewed as well. For the regime-level analyses, statistical material on migration and normative material concerning legislation, policies and programmes was gathered.

Only a few of the interviewees had left their home country for work or studies; the majority were marriage migrants who arrived to escape post-socialist turbulences. Coming from the former socialist regime based on the mother-worker contract, they were well educated and motivated to combine work and family and thus 'fit' into the Nordic regime. Factual integration was, however, a complex and many-phased process; in view of intersectionality, the migration and life line approach was an important component of the analysis. As marriage migrants in northern areas, the women lived closely among natives and often lacked contacts among their own cultural group at the same time as they had to face severe challenges: constructing a bi-cultural partnership and a new practice for motherhood, learning a new language, new cultural codes and, moreover, struggling with various kinds of 'othering'. Cultural disrespect - linked both in media and inter-personal communication to prostitution from Russia - was an additional hindrance in regard to the labour market as well. A large part of migrants from Russia were, even after many years of residence, unemployed or employed on a part-time or casual basis especially in Finland and Sweden, which were suffering from economic regression throughout the 1990s. A downward career move, often due to lack of cultural recognition, i.e. trouble with getting the examination taken in the country of origin accepted, was not unusual.

This also harmed migrants as welfare recipients and made them (and their children) economically dependent on a Nordic partner; this too goes against Nordic values and, naturally, women's self-identity as autonomous and working women. On the other hand, coming from Eastern Europe, they were capable of benefiting from educational opportunities even at a later age. Also, to a great extent the aspirations for a more secure life and a better future for children (including the Russian-born ones) have

been fulfilled thanks to welfare universalism; support for single mothers laid a firm basis for positive identification and belonging.

All in all, the feminisation of migration is a current challenge to the Nordic welfare regime as it has been formed in periods of no migration (Finland, Norway) or male labour migration (Sweden). From the angle of 'active citizenship', the interplay of rights and agency, the deepest gap between migrant and native women lies in political citizenship, even after naturalisation. The Nordic regime does not fulfil the promise to include new citizens and citizens-to-be in decision-making, empower them in the spirit of 'state feminism' to solve the numerous problems which are burning particularly to 'margizens', women with only a temporary and non-individualised permission to stay. More than anything, this concerns violence in close relationships although this problem and issue has been high on Nordic agendas since the early 1990s. In view of migrants, there is good reason to speak about a "gender paradox" in the 'women-friendly' Norden.

Main publications (to be completed later)

Aino Saarinen & Jana Sverdljuk & Kerstin Hägg: Russian Women as Immigrants in 'Norden'. Gender Perspectives on Everyday Life, Citizenship and Social Justice. SKK Bulletin 1/2005.

Aino Saarinen & Jana Sverdljuk: Russian Women in Grey Zones of Nordic Welfare. NIKKMagasin 3-2006, 20-23.

Aino Saarinen: Reflections on Interviewing Russian women Immigrants: Challenged in the Nordic Countries. Petra Sinisalo-Katajisto et al. (eds.): Issues of Identity in the Russian-speaking Diaspora. *Studia Slavica Finlandensia* 2006, 276-307.

Aino Saarinen: Venäläiset naiset maahanmuuttajina 'naisystävällisessä' Pohjolassa. Kansalaisuus ja stigmatisoinnut identiteetti. Tuomas Martikainen & Marja Tiilikainen (toim.): Maahanmuuttajanaiset: kotoutuminen, perhe ja työ. Väestötutkimuslaitoksen julkaisusarja D 46/2007, 125-146.

Jana Sverdljuk: Russian Women-immigrants in the Nordic Countries: Justice in the Sphere of Social Protection and Employment. E. Oleksy, D. Golanska & J. Hearn (eds.): Gender and Citizenship: Equality, Diversity, Migration. (forthcoming 2008-09)

Jana Sverdljuk: Contradicting the 'Prostitution Stigma': Narratives of Russian Migrant Women Living in Norway. Sari Irni & Suvi Keskinen & Diana Mulinari & Salla Tuori (eds.): Gender, 'Race' and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region. Complying with Colonialism. Aldershot: Ashgate (forthcoming 2008)

Kerstin Hägg: Att bryta upp och slå rot. Ryska invandrare kvinnor i norra Sverige (work in progress, forthcoming 2008)

Aino Saarinen & Jana Sverdljuk & Kerstin Hägg: Russian Women as Immigrants in 'Norden' - Finland, Norway, Sweden. Gender Perspectives on Everyday Life; social Justice and Cultural Recognition; Citizenship and Participation. RWN Project Report (forthcoming 2008)

Aino Saarinen & Marina Calloni (eds.): Builders of a 'New Europe'. Women Immigrants from the Eastern Europe in Western Transregions. ESF Workshop Report (forthcoming 2008, with contributions from Saarinen, Sverdljuk and Hägg)

RWN IN DETAIL

The aims and research questions

The RWN project was a multi-disciplinary and comparative inquiry into the life of Russian women living as immigrants in the Nordic Barents region, i.e. the northernmost parts of Finland, Norway and Sweden, after the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991. At the centre of attention were women's experiences of immigration as 'others' and the de- and reconstruction of their identities towards transculturalism in the framework of structures, culture and agency. The problematic was approached through three disciplines and three topical issues - the 'prisms' - that were both distinct and intertwined with violence against women in its multiple forms, as follows:

- 1) Everyday life, especially in view of combining work and family (Kerstin Hägg, sociology);
- 2) Social justice and cultural recognition, especially in view of discourses on prostitution (Jana Sverdljuk, social philosophy);
- 3) Citizenship and participation, especially in view of experiences of gendered violence (Aino Saarinen, political science).

In the final instance, RWN was also to provide critical insights into migration, welfare and equality regimes in the increasingly multicultural Norden. Also of interest was spatiality, as migration research has concentrated on cities and metropolis instead of rural areas and peripheries.

RWN was linked to the development and research project NCRB - A Network for Crisis Centres in the Barents Region project for 1999-2005 and the Nordic-Russian Femina Borealis Network active in Barents since 1993.

Material and methods

In order to map out the experiences of women immigrants and explore the regime-level dynamics, the data consisted of qualitative, quantitative and normative materials.

The main material was qualitative. To give voice to the immigrant women themselves and lay stress on their self-definitions, 59 women from Russia were theme-interviewed either a) individually (21) or through b) eight group discussions (five in the north, three in the Capitals) (38). To grasp the encounters with Nordic institutions and the formation of other-definitions from the side of the majorities, c) so-called experts, i.e. Russian women immigrants (7) and d) native persons (21) working or active in public and civic organisations were theme-interviewed as well.

For the regime-level analyses, statistical material concerning migration and normative material concerning legislation, policies and programmes was gathered.

In the planning phase, an interview guide comprised of the themes and the ethical and practical instructions throughout the process was drafted. The interviewees were contacted through two-stage chains of native and migrant persons. All interviewees and contact persons signed a form of informed consent; so did the transcribers and translators. The interviewees will receive a summary of the results.

The interviews covered the whole migration process but concentrated on life in Norden. They were carried out in four languages: Russian, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish; taped and transcribed; those in Russian or Finnish were translated into English.

In the first phase, the interviews were analysed jointly by making migration and life line analyses of women interviewed individually. In the second phase, all different kinds of interviews were analysed together on three levels of interpretation: self-understanding (of the interviewees), common sense and theoretical interpretation. In the third phase, the 'prisms' were constructed on the basis of the interviews and reflected upon - separately, by each of team members - through the use of disciplinary terms of the three fields of everyday life, social justice and cultural recognition, and citizenship and participation.

The regime-level material was analysed against feminist debates on Nordic values and the universalist (egalitarian) 'women-friendly' model. To contextualise the migration process and the motivations and situations of migrants, reflections on the past and present regime in the country of origin - the USSR and Russia - were also included in the analyses. The developments were approached intersectionally in order to bring to the fore systemic gaps, silences and contradictions from the angle of women migrants, per se and in comparison to the native majorities. These analyses were intertwined with the 'prism' analyses in order to explore the dynamics between structures, culture and agency more specifically, in private and public domains, at inter-personal and institutional levels, in various spheres of social life and various phases of the migration and life lines.

Main results

Since the early 1990s, migration to all Nordic countries has been increasing and feminising; moreover, work migrants have become a minority in comparison to refugees and marriage migrants from the Third Countries. Yet the differences between the countries continue to be substantive: in Finland, the foreign-born population accounts for 3,2%, in Norway 7,8% but in Sweden - with a history of immigration since the 1950s - 12,2% (2004). The countries also differ in regards to the amount of migrants from the former USSR / Russia. In Finland, where a significant number belong to the category of returnees with Finnish roots, they are the largest group (1. place) whereas in Norway and Sweden they are a minor group (15. and 25. place). However, in all countries migrants arriving across the Eastern border are, by a majority, women; in Norway and Sweden even two thirds or more are marriage migrants. In terms of age, they are mainly in their 20s to 50s, which is of importance as the target countries are characterised by the aging of the population, the Nordic Barents even by downright depopulation.

The women from Russia who were interviewed individually fitted well into the general picture. They were a heterogeneous group but there were, of course, common features related to migration. Many of them arrived in order to escape transitional turbulences and poverty and many moved with their Russian-born children. Coming from the former socialist regime based on the mother-worker contract, they were well- and even very well-educated, in the prime of their working life and highly motivated to combine work and family and make use of welfare services, ie. construct two-wage earner families. In other words, they were in many respects similar to native Nordic women brought up in the 'women-friendly' 'social-democratic' regime based - normatively - on women's presence in the public domain and gender equality in the private domain. However, their factual integration - family life, encounters with public institutions and processes of belonging, analysed through the frame concept of active citizenship - is a complex and many-phased process. All in all, migrants' civil, economic-social and cultural rights and political agency are intertwined and interdependent but differently so, in different phases of the migration and life line. The interview analyses brought forth both positive and gloomy pictures that in many ways go back to the regime level. In detail:

Everyday life

An overview of differences and similarities among the interviewees and their living conditions in Russia and in the Nordic countries makes up the framework for the analysis of their everyday life. The migration process is about why and how the interviewees emigrated from Russia to live permanently in a Nordic country. The collapse of the USSR opened the borders so that many women left for work and studies here and Nordic people went to work there. The majority of the women in the RWN study live, and a few have lived, with Nordic men. It should be noted that they had met them either at work, when studying abroad or visiting friends and relatives living on this side of the border already; only a few had made active (e.g. Internet-mediated) arrangements to find a partner in a Nordic country.

After arrival in the new country, the period of adaptation began. The immigrants have all, to some extent, experienced difficulties, either due to initial problems with the language, the economic dependency on their partners, social codes conflicting with what they were used to in Russia or disappointments and discrepancies between expectations and reality. Support from partners and new relatives and friends has been of great importance in their adjustment to the new country.

The social background in Russia, the educational level, the place where the women now live and their age upon migrating have been of importance for the women's present everyday life situations. Unemployment and problems with getting a qualified job are the main obstacles as the northern areas, especially in Finland and Sweden, were characterised by economic regression, rising unemployment and the gradual dismantling of the public sector throughout the 1990s; this is why it has been easier for women living in towns rather than in villages to get further education and jobs. Very low pensions for elderly migrants and controlling, abusive or violent partners are difficulties some of them have faced. Social security, housing, cleanliness and "bureaucracy with a smile" are highly appreciated but many interviewees miss their families and friends and the emotionality and openness of the Russian way of communicating. Most interviewees are pleased with their lives and they do not want

to return, but they are critical of several things in the Nordic countries, such as the healthcare system in Finland and Norway and policies concerning equal opportunity and immigration in Sweden.

The media representation of Russian women and Russia had been embarrassing and intimidating not only for themselves but also for their children and partners. Many women had experienced that they were not really accepted by local inhabitants that were not relatives or close friends until they had proved that they were honest and decent women with no intentions to move south as soon as they got a permanent residence permission.

Not surprisingly, professional natives who have met Russian migrant women regard them as very good clients or patients. They are like “us” and in various ways resources for the local communities in the North. They contribute to giving partners a better quality of life. They often bring with them children born in Russia and as they also give birth to children in the new country, they help keep up the number of inhabitants in areas where it would otherwise be very difficult to maintain schools and other public services.

Social justice and cultural recognition

In terms of social justice and cultural recognition, there were many experiences of marginalisation and exclusion. As marriage migrants, women live closely among the natives and often lack contacts among their own cultural group as the rural peripheries are vast, the centres middle-sized and the migrants few. This is problematic as they have to combat various kinds of ‘othering’, cultural devaluation and disrespect, from the side of the majorities.

Even immigrants as resourceful as women from Russia must work hard towards their integration into the labour market and the acceptance of their examinations. Particularly in the early phases of immigration, many failed to become economically independent. For the same reason, they ended up in the ‘grey zones’ of the welfare regime, at worst in personal economic dependency. Many women were critical towards Nordic integration policies for not considering the individual needs of clients, and also thought that the public authorities are rather formal in their functioning. They pointed, moreover, to immigration-linked problems. In their view, institutional norms might ‘absorb’ cultural and ethnic prejudices: some practices related to social security might result in restrictions of economic and social rights due to proceeding from the idea that immigrants should, one-sidedly, confirm to local Nordic values and norms.

A successful integration can also be hindered by degrading images of Russian women as man-hunters or prostitutes. In some cases exotic sexist images of Russian femininity might have unfavourable consequences when women are meeting their potential employees. From the angle of migrants themselves, lack of cultural recognition complicates the realisation of the ideal of justice and may lead to the lowering of women’s self-esteem, constructing woman-migrants as a second-rate cultural group.

On the other hand, the aspirations of women migrants for a more stable and secure life and a better future for their children than offered in today's Russia have been fulfilled in the Nordic regime - thanks to its welfare universalism that is, in principle,

favourable toward all disadvantaged social groups, including migrants. Particularly in regard to single mothers, it was stressed that the Nordic states protect women and their children; this created a firm basis for positive identification and belonging. Women appreciated also good access to educational rights, as they are not age-specific as in the USSR / Russia; several of them had acquired a new profession, often in care work. All in all, they try to live up to the ideal of gender equality within the family and in social life, structure their family life around care for children and both parents' involvement in paid labour. Irrespective of all barriers and obstacles, the majority of women are also rather successful at constructing alternative self-identities (such as: 'woman on the move', 'working woman', 'family migrant' and others) and creating positive images of Russian migrants among local people, with whom they are living side-by-side in small Northern communities.

To summarise, migrant women from Russia feel that the principle of economic redistribution and welfare should be completed by cultural inclusion and justice. From the angle of the receiving countries and areas, a failure in labour integration in particular leads to a 'brain waste'- a problem brought up also by many native authorities.

Citizenship and participation

As to the formal rights, the first years of residence are characterised by uncertainties and not-belonging. More than half of the Russian interviewees were naturalised or 'quasi-citizens' with permanent stay permits but no one had been elected to a local body yet. It should be emphasised that the nation-state related rights are the last rights granted to newcomers. Finland seemed most unfavourable. The non-existence of dual citizenship had prevented women from applying for citizenship, often due to transnational motherhood or daughterhood: they had to prioritise dependent people's needs before their own rights, that is, stay free to travel back to Russia anytime to help their parents or children. A migrant's own dependence was even more fatal in the 'margizen' years with a temporary permit. If the partnership breaks up 'too' soon, she will lose the permission to stay; there are no firm prospects for naturalisation and, consequently, political involvement. It is not rare for this to be due to partner violence; many women do not dare to seek help that in peripheral villages is, in addition, far away. Prolonging the period for an individualised permit (in Finland in 2004) has thus increased violations of civil / human rights and harmed political citizenship as well. Russian-born experts are aware of this and so are civic actors; support from the authorities varies especially in Finland; in Norway and Sweden the regulations and practices are significantly better and improving.

As to constructions of gender and politics, the past seems to have a great impact even on this side of the border. In the USSR party-state women were excluded from decision-making; the immigrants had no experience in power-holding, only in 'non-political' Pioneer and Komsomol mobilisation; after the dissolution of the socialist regime, many had been keen to get rid of this kind of 'obligatory' activism and all politics for good. Today's politics in Russia, for its part, was conceived of as so malist and corrupted that a 'feminine' woman should avoid attending to it. As immigrants, a few excluded the option of mere voting as 'non-natives'; some complained about the many-year delay caused by the lack of full rights; some pondered upon running for office after settling down and learning about the novelties related to the multi-party system. However, in their opinion, there was no contradiction between being a

woman and powerful in politics in Norden. Interestingly, Nordic politics was seen to work for women but Nordic "feminism" was all over almost unanimously discarded.

As to agency, participatory activism open to all from the entrance on normally starts in homes and personal networks. They offer shelter to abused women and are in general intimate spaces for sharing views, experiences and information. Some women had taken steps toward civic fora, 'weak publics', by joining a migrants' association, a friendship society or a native women's association; they create possibilities for separate collective identification and, occasionally, transcultural exchange and contacts to local politicians. Interventions into formal fora, 'strong publics', were sporadic; none were carried out in an organised manner, only by individuals or ad hoc groups. Media constructions of Russian women as 'prostitutes' aroused anger but the episodic actions - taken place in Norway and Sweden - did not lead to any real results. In rural areas, many mentioned spatial obstacles, isolation and long distances. Authorities and decision-makers did not do much to activate migrant women politically in any of the northern regions.

The regime-level perspective

The Nordic regime, praised for being universalist and women-friendly, has been built for the native-born majorities in times of no migration (Finland, Norway) or (male) labour migration (Sweden); since the 1980s, it has been somewhat reformed from the angle of humanitarian (refugee) migration. The newest and feminised wave of migration from the Third Countries presents other challenges. They are in many ways crystallised into the institution of marriage and partnership. Marriage migrants may not even be mentioned at the policy level after they have passed the border control outlined in the Aliens acts that now are more and more in harmony with the EU and Schengen agreements. Another paradox is that migrants confront, formally and informally, the obligation to live in accordance with Nordic values at the same time as the Nordic regime itself violates them in many ways. In detail:

The importance of labour integration is now emphasised in the Integration legislation and policies but marriage migrants are, actually, missing from them; their welfare rights are not updated in this respect either. Consequently, the two-wage earner family model, for instance, may work against migrants even if they come from so similar a gender regime as the former USSR. Due to these complexities, the reforms should go beyond formal equality, be outlined towards the politics of equality of opportunities. Women's economic independence should, after all, be at the heart of active citizenship in view of gender equality and agency.

Combating violations of women's civil / human rights has been high on Nordic agendas since the 1990s. Concerning migrants, much of policy attention has been directed to violence rooted in newcomers' own cultures, not to violence rooted in Nordic masculinities. The situation of women in the 'margizen' category is hazardous and not in line with Nordic values; in particular, the problems related to the Aliens acts are of key importance from this angle.

Including cultural rights to the Nordic regime is a recent matter. Learning the native language and sharing the national and Nordic cultural heritage and preserving migrants' own culture is important but only part of the problematic. Combating cultural devaluation and disrespect, 'othering' in its multiple forms, is a timely

challenge. Transforming the views of native majorities as well and creating new practices within civic and public institutions is urgent in the implementation of the new Anti-discrimination legislation. The formation of transcultural communication, the minority-majority dialogue, is also vital.

The question of involving migrant women politically is hardly raised beyond a mention in any integration policies and programmes although a key condition for their empowering is opening access to both representative and participatory politics and strengthening links between them. Native Nordic women are seen world-wide as exceptionally well included in decision-making bodies but there are only a few women immigrants in them. The present “equality paradox” calls for self-criticism: it is not in congruence with Nordic values and the much-praised Nordic ‘state-feminism’.

Critical attention must be paid to the multi-level system as well, both upwards and downwards. Integration into the EU and Schengen regimes brings with it a special stress on border control and exclusion; in this the institution of family and marriage seems to become more and more central in Norden as well. In peripheral areas, such as the Nordic Barents, the feminisation of migration, especially marriage migration, calls for ‘tailored’ measures: in distant and rural areas with small centres the situations are very different from those in the Capital areas.

To conclude, in normative terms there is reason to promote create a “comprehensive political project” that includes participatory parity in all spheres of society - including politics, in which the gap between native and newcomer-women is today widest.

Other dissemination of results

The aims, methods and results were disseminated throughout the research process: in the three countries, in the target area of the Barents region; in Nordic, European and global contexts; in academic units and civic organisations including migrant and Russian fora.

The research team has given more than thirty presentations. Academic fora include: 6th European Conference on Gender Studies (2006); International Sociological Association (ISA): Research Committee 32 on Women in Society (2007); 14th Nordic Migration Researchers’ Conference (2007); 8th International Interdisciplinary Conference on Women (forthcoming 2008).

Civic partners and fora include: NCRB - Crisis Centre Network in Barents; Northern Feminist University (Norway); Finnish-Russian Society; Multicultural Women Association (Finland); Family Federation in Finland. In Norway, RWN has attended public debates on Russian migration.

RWN has organised two workshops of its own and contributed to several thematically related workshops. Academic workshops include: RWN Workshop, Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Research, Oslo University (2005); ESF - SCSS Exploratory Workshop on women’s migration from Eastern Europe to the EU Europe, Aleksanteri Institute, Helsinki University (2006); 8th Annual Aleksanteri Conference,

Helsinki University (forthcoming 2008). From the ESF workshop materials an anthology will be finalised in summer 2008.

Worth mentioning are also the RWN-related lectures and series of lectures at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels: at Aleksanteri Institute (2007, 2008); NUPI - Nordic Institute for Foreign Policy and Kyiv-Mogula Academy, Kiev (2005, 2007); Oslo University (2008).

A research visit was made from Oslo University to Helsinki University in 2006. Three thematically related visits were made to/from Russia and Eastern Europe in 2006 and 2007 to promote analyses and process new research initiatives.

Finally, Aleksanteri Institute / the project director have made a related research initiative: Gintz - Gender, Intimacy and Citizenship. Participation Practices of Women Migrants from Post-socialist Countries in the EU Transregions (FP7) (2007, in further evaluation); and joined a consortium entitled Prospects for Integration of Migrants from 'Third Countries' and Their Labour Market Situations (EC/Freedom and Security) (2008, in evaluation).

The new umbrella project at Aleksanteri Institute, WGA - Welfare, Gender and Agency in Russia in the 2000s (2008-2010) as well as the related Annual Aleksanteri Conference 2008 on the same themes will contribute to analyses of the situations in the area of origin.