

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS OF KARELIA IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The coming of perestroika made it possible to discuss and directly handle the construction of a democratic civil society in Karelia and Russia.

Women took an active part in the process, having stated that "democracy minus women is not democracy" (1, 7). Very slowly, the people of Karelia began to distinguish themselves from the state; they are coming to understand that they must now live in a pluralistic society and depend, first and foremost, on themselves. The partocratic society had no use for people it could no longer control, who had realized their indisputable value - as either women or men. Having lost their trust in governmental structures and political parties, women started creating their own movements and societies (2). Since the late 1980s women's organizations have been appearing in Karelia which declared themselves to be non-governmental organizations (NGO) (6). Citizens refusing to obey anything but their own conscience are able to transform their country. Self-respect is the basis of civil society.

Though the notion of "civil society" has itself only been a recent development in for Russia and Karelia, its roots are in 18th century Western Europe, where the women's movement was first inaugurated (3). Throughout world history civil organizations have influenced governmental structures in various ways and striven to introduce alternative management systems. This is communicated in a desire to exist outside state control as well. Unfortunately, the history of Russia and Karelia has run contrary to this and society has never been able to significantly influence any governmental structures; this tendency still prevails.

Today there are about 10 NGOs, located in Petrozavodsk, Kostomuksha, Medvezhjegorsk and in the Lahdenpohja region, seeking to render assistance and support to the women's movement and the development of civil society which have been registered at the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Karelia (RK) (4). An important factor in establishing a civil society is international contacts. Today, members of the Karelian women's movement are actively trying to co-operate with women's organizations both in Russia and abroad. For instance, the women's civil movement "Martha", registered on 18 December 1992 at the RK Ministry of Justice, was created in the village of Lasanen, in the Kurkijoki postal district of the Lahdenpohja region (formerly Finnish territory) with the aid of Finnish women who told them that the first women's organization "Martta" (in Finnish) - "Marta" in Russian - appeared in Kurkijoki in 1905. This organization sought to help women in household work, in learning needlework and agricultural practices. Such Russian cities as St. Petersburg, Pitkaranta and Petrozavodsk have their own "Marthas." Not all of them are officially registered, which is now permitted by the Russian Federation (RF) law governing civil organizations enacted in May, 1995.

The role of leaders is very important for building a civil society. As our history and experience show, citizens, even when participating in elections, do not often vote for a program, but for a certain person.

Elections for the Legislative Assembly (LA) were held in Karelia on 17 April 1994. Women did a substantial amount of work to make them possible, and took an active part in them though women's organizations themselves did not nominate their own candidates for deputy. Of the total of 56 deputies, 11 women were elected. Thus, today 20 % of the members of the Legislative Assembly of the RK are women (this index of women's participation in the supreme governing body of the RK shows a higher proportion of women than existed at the beginning of perestroika when "quotas for women" were voided)(5). Valentina Pivnenko became the Chairperson of the House of Representatives of the Legislative Assembly of the RK; starting this year she will represent our Republic in the Council of the Federation (the only woman in this governing body).

The election of 17 December 1995 showed that the activity of women is not lower. TV correspondent Larissa Zlobina was elected to the State Duma of the Russian Federation in a one-mandate district of Karelia as an independent deputy. Ninety women of Petrozavodsk (of the 280 candidates) participated in the Petrozavodsk City Council elections and 18 were elected.

It is noteworthy that only those women who had entered the elections as independent candidates won. Women's civil organizations in Karelia are like living organisms: they are born, they develop, some die without having reached maturity. Thus, 1994-95 was an extremely active period of creation - a "birthquake" - of women's organizations. Having, however, encountered a great number of problems and realizing that the woman's concept alone is not always easy to finance, nor that it can always be combined with commerce, some of them terminate their operations or are transformed, eg, the Petrozavodsk women's club "Elite" (N. Vavilova and I. Rusanova). It started working actively in autumn 1993, was registered by the RK Ministry of Justice in 1994, but by the end of that year had already ceased holding meetings though the club had become a kind of a prototype for the artistic intelligentsia salon "Elegy" which had appeared in Petrozavodsk.

The Karelian Centre of Gender Studies (KCGS) is one of the newest organizations seeking to improve the status of women and promote a democratic civil society. This NGO, which was registered by the RK Ministry of Justice on 30 October 1995, co-operates actively with Moscow and St. Petersburg gender centres and, along with representatives from 20 other regions of Russia, participated in creating the Association of Independent Women's Organizations in Moscow in 1995. The KCGS views the dissemination of information concerning the experiences of the international women's movement, especially in regard to the development of civil society in Karelia and Russia, as one of its tasks.

In the initial stages of perestroika the process of developing civil society was primarily thought to involve criticizing governmental and civil organizations, the existing decision-making apparatus and their mechanisms of implementation; the time has now come for joint constructive actions. KCGS members stand for the partnership of NGO and governmental bodies. An example of such a positive partnership is the Karelian-Finnish forum "The Modern World through Women's Eyes", which was held in Petrozavodsk on 3-4 March 1996 under the auspices of the "Year of Finland in Karelia".

We would much like to believe that the decree of Government of the RF and the "Concept of Improving Women's Status in the RF" enacted on 8 January 1996 will serve as a cornerstone in building civil society in Russia not only as a society guaranteeing equal rights, but also one insuring equal opportunity (10).

Women's problems are not confined solely to the family and raising children. They are linked to changes in employment, structural reorganization in the production process, social infrastructure, privatization and migration processes, all of which cause an abrupt deterioration in situation of women. All proposed laws must be subject to gender analysis; this will facilitate the prevention of sexual discrimination in legislation (8). The efficient work of representative bodies is today impossible without a consideration of public opinion and active partnership with civil unions. Women's civil organizations and the research centre have experience in social work and in appraising independently proposed gender-oriented laws, a high-qualification level in this sphere (9).

Studies of the activities of women's organizations in Karelia and their effect on the establishment of civil society bring us to the following conclusions:

- 1) it is necessary to allocate a certain percentage of federal and local budgets and social funds to the financing of socially-important programs conducted by NGOs, and
- 2) the financing of socially-important programs both for NGOs and governmental institutions should be organized on a competitive basis.

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