

The land of the October revolution: a country of women walking on the road to emancipation

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Take the position of women. In this field, not a single democratic party in the world, not even in the most advanced bourgeois republic, has done in decades so much as a hundredth part of what we did in our very first year in power. We really razed to the ground the infamous laws placing women in a position of inequality, restricting divorce and surrounding it with disgusting formalities, denying recognition to children born out of wedlock, enforcing a search for their fathers, etc., laws numerous survivals of which, to the shame of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism, are to be found in all civilized countries. We have a thousand times the right to be proud of what we have done in this field. But the more thoroughly we have cleared the ground of the lumber of the old, bourgeois laws and institutions, the clearer it is to us that we have only cleared the ground to build on but are not yet building.

Vladimir I. Lenin¹

¹ V. I. Lenin, “A Great Beginning”, 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm>.

2017 is the 100th anniversary of the October revolution, the greatest victorious revolution of the working class to date. After the October revolution, the young Soviet power immediately took steps to fulfill the demands of the working class and the oppressed. Not only it did meet the demands of them, but also in the direction of the socialist revolution program, recognized a series of rights, that the oppressed did not even imagine their existence and know their importance, and gave conscious effort to make sure that they were used. The young workers' power was trying to lay the stones of the emancipation of the working class along with the other oppressed. Women, with oppressed nations, were at the top of these groups.

At the beginning of the 1900s it was almost impossible to talk about women's political rights in the world. It was a period when women struggled not only for the right to stand for election but even for the right to vote. And in many countries this struggle has continued for many years. In countries like Switzerland, so-called cradle of democracy, women gained the equal right to vote and stand for election in 1971. Only after women in Saudi Arabia gained this right in 2015, even if limited to local elections, it became possible to say that women have this right all around the world. After the October revolution, the Soviet power became the first state that recognized this right to women by immediately granting the widest political rights on equal terms to men. Similarly, abortion in many Western countries has become a legal right only in the second half of the 20th century (England 1967, USA 1973, France 1975, Italy 1978). Even today, in many countries it is not legal or it can only be done depending on certain conditions. We haven't forgotten yet that Erdogan lashed out against abortion by saying "every abortion is like an Uludere"² in 2012 and his attack was repelled by the struggle of the women. And still we struggle for free access to safe and legal abortion under hygienic conditions. Although antiabortion was dominant in its own land and all around the world, the Soviet power recognized this right with the conditions that we are fighting for the sake of virtually even today. The young workers' state made a number of laws that changed the lives of women, signed decrees.

In this article, we will try to evaluate the effects of the October revolution on women's lives and what kind of consequences it has. Within the limits of this article, we will first try to provide a framework of practical steps have been taken in the Soviet power in different aspects from participation to work force to education, from laws regulating marriage and divorce to collectivization of the domestic house work and child care, from the leap in the political scene to the abortion, etc. We will then focus on the question if it was possible to preserve the continuity of these rights and if not, we'll try to explain the reasons for the emergence of new situation.

² Uludere/Roboski is a massacre where 34 Kurdish peasants were bombarded to death by the Turkish air force, not one single person has been prosecuted.

And finally we aim to draw lessons on the capacity of the working class program in terms of the emancipation of women in the Soviet experience. Before this, it will be useful to have a brief look at the conditions women had been living in Russia before the October revolution.

The Situation of Women during the Tsarist Period

During the tsarist period, women were first slaves of their fathers, then their husbands. They were getting married before they were 12. On the day of the wedding, the bride's father gave the groom a whip as a gift, and in almost every house there was a tradition that the whip was hung in bedrooms. Women did not have the right to divorce. If a woman abandoned her husband, she was handed back to her husband by police force. A married woman did not have her own passport. She was registered to her husband's passport.³ She did not have the right to have her own property. She did not have the right to make decisions on the family's properties. Not only on the properties, women did not have power on their children either.

Without the permission of her husband, a married woman could not even look for a job. The living and working conditions of women who were able to work with their husbands' permission were also very heavy. With the increase in mechanization, jobs that do not require physical power were creating an employment area for women, but women's salaries were only as half as men's salaries. There weren't rights such as maternity leave or breast-feeding permission. Many sources that describe the period tell that women have worked in factories by hiding their pregnancies until the beginning of severe birth pain, or even sometimes working women gave birth at their workbenches and then continue to their work. 95% of women were giving birth without any medical help, on average 30,000 women were dying every year during childbirth, Russia was leading the way among European countries in terms of child death.⁴ No methods were applied that a woman can access in order to prevent pregnancy. Because abortion was also forbidden, pregnant women were appealing to experienced women of the village who can end pregnancy with nails and hooks.⁵ Naturally, this procedure was putting women's lives under danger and causing diseases, injuries and the frazzling of women in young ages.

As in other capitalist countries; prostitution was a very serious problem in combination with male domination, economic difficulties, and making the female body a commodity that could be bought and sold. The fact that the women were in a pre-

³ Here, passport refers to a specific document used to travel within Russia.

⁴ Chanie Rosenberg, *Kadınlar ve Perestroyka [Women and Perestroika]*, çev. Osman Akinhay, İstanbul: Pencere Yayınları, 1990, p. 88.

⁵ Sheila Rowbotham, *Kadınlar, Direniş ve Devrim [Women, Resistance and Revolution]*, çev. Nilgün Şarman, İstanbul: Payel Yayınları, 1994, p. 161.

carious position, to say it with their logic at the time, women being ownerless was imposing prostitution as a way of livelihood. A study conducted in 1889 confirms this fact by showing that 83.5% of the registered prostitutes in Russia are women in the worst-case strata, and 65% are women who were servants once in the bourgeois and aristocratic homes.⁶ In Tsarist Russia, a so-called struggle against prostitution was being carried out. In reality, prostitutes were registered and prostitution was institutionalized. On the other hand, women were convicted to prostitution in the rest of their lives by a kind of blacklisting.

Women were also very underdeveloped in education. According to the last census of 1913, made before the October revolution, 83% of women did not even know how to read and write. Almost all of the remaining women were women from the upper classes, and it is estimated that most of those women have been sent to exile with the revolution, so the proportion of literate women has fallen to 5% immediately after the revolution.⁷ In the case of the Peoples of the East, this is getting even worse, and it usually is not even possible to find a single woman who is literate.

The situation of women was relatively worse in this region which is under the influence of Islam and will contain Soviet Republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, than other parts of Russia. Women were considered as goods which were being bought and sold. There was a system called “kalim” which was an equivalent of bride wealth. Women were bought with this system by their husband, and then the husband had unlimited authority over the woman. If he wanted, a man could marry more than one woman. After her husband had died, a woman had no right to speak about her own life, and this time she became the property of her husband’s eldest brother. If he wanted, he could have kept the woman for himself or could sell her to another man.

Women living in the East had to cover themselves up. In addition to burqa, women in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had to cover their faces with a special black veil which is woven from horse hair. “In this way a woman covered with paranjas (burqa) looks completely like a ghost, a dark room with feet. Her dark and amorphous image was forming a great, inconceivable contradiction with the luminous bazaars and palaces and colorfully dressed men of Samarkand, Tashkent and Bukhara.”⁸

Of course it is not possible to talk about political rights of women in a country

6 Gül Özgür, *Rusya’da 1917 Sosyalist Ekim Devrimi ve Kadınların Kurtuluşu Cilt:1 [Socialist October Revolution and Emancipation of Women in Russia Volume:1]*, İstanbul: Dönüşüm Yayınları, 1993, p. 394.

7 George St. George, *Sovyetler Birliğinde Kadın [Our Soviet Sister]*, çev. S. Özbudun- O. Yener, İstanbul: El Yayınları, 1987, p. 23.

8 Gül Özgür, *Rusya’da 1917 Sosyalist Ekim Devrimi ve Kadınların Kurtuluşu Cilt:2 [Socialist October Revolution and Emancipation of Women in Russia Volume:2]*, İstanbul: Dönüşüm Yayınları, 1993, p. 92.

where women are pushed into the background. During the oppressive era of Tsardom, women felt most of this oppression in political rights. Women did not have the right to vote or stand for election. Women were completely excluded from political life because they were not allowed to work in many occupations and also not allowed to work in administrative areas.

That is to say, the October Revolution rose in the lands of an almost hellish country for women; Soviet power was struggling against the repressive, reactionary structures, habits, traditions, rules that have rooted for centuries for the salvation of women and the working class.

Women as an actor of the revolution

So, what did women do about their condition being so underdeveloped? Did they buckle under the difficulties and pressure or did they begin struggle? While answering this question, we need to go back to 1895 from 1917, we see that there were four women including Krupskaya as leaders of the organization named “Union of Struggle for the Liberation of Working Class” which was formed by Lenin. In the light of the experiences of this organization which can be considered as the first seeds of Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), in 1900 Krupskaya wrote an illegal brochure named *Woman as a worker* which was addressing the situation of women and their political duties.⁹ In 1905, they were struggling in the ranks of the revolution alongside with men. Between 1905 and 1907, Bolsheviks were doing systematic agitation and organization work among woman workers, and organizing meetings where women problems were discussed and women’s demands were risen. Although the majority was intellectuals at that time, the rate of female members of the RSDLP was 15%, even higher than the German Social Democratic Party, which has a much longer history and stronger tradition.¹⁰

The period of repression and reaction between 1908 and 1912 led to the arrest of many female leaders, the expulsion of them to exile, and the movement retreated to a completely illegal area. After this period, as the working class movement revived and the opportunities of making legal demonstrations increased, the products of the systematic studies carried out among the women workers also started to show themselves. On 8 March 1913, RSDLP decided to celebrate International Working Women’s Day for the first time in St. Petersburg with a mass demonstration, and an enthusiastic meeting was held on the lead of woman workers, especially textile workers. International Working Women’s Day was celebrated with a special issue of *Pravda* which was published that day.¹¹ A year after the women’s letters to *Prav-*

9 Ibid., p. 103.

10 Ibid., p. 109.

11 Alexandra Kollontay, *Birçok hayat yaşadım*, çev. Saliha Nazlı-Süheyla Kaya, İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2010, p. 115.

da grew like an avalanche, on March 8, 1914, *Rabotnitsa* (*The Woman Worker*) which was Bolsheviks' first journal for women began to be published by a publishing committee of female revolutionaries such as Nadezhda Krupskaya and Inessa Armand.¹²

After publishing seven issues, *Rabotnitsa* was closed together with all other revolutionary publications, with the beginning of the World War I. With the effect of their position against the imperialist war, Bolsheviks' power within the peasant and working women who have suffered the most from the war increased. The biggest breakthrough until that time took place with the firing of women in the wake of the February revolution, which again took place in 8th of March Women's Day. As Trotsky tells in the *History of Russian Revolution*, one day before, no one thought "Women's Day" could start the revolution:

Thus the fact is that the February revolution was begun from below, overcoming the resistance of its own revolutionary organizations, the initiative being taken of their own accord by the most oppressed and downtrodden part of the proletariat – the women textile workers, among them no doubt many soldiers' wives. The overgrown breadlines had provided the last stimulus. About 90,000 workers, men and women, were on strike that day. The fighting mood expressed itself in demonstrations, meetings, encounters with the police. The movement began in the Vyborg district with its large industrial establishments; thence it crossed over to the Petersburg side. There were no strikes or demonstrations elsewhere, according to the testimony of the secret police. On that day detachments of troops were called in to assist the police – evidently not many of them – but there were no encounters with them. A mass of women, not all of them workers, flocked to the municipal дума demanding bread. It was like demanding milk from a he-goat. Red banners appeared in different parts of the city, and inscriptions on them showed that the workers wanted bread, but neither autocracy nor war. Woman's Day passed successfully, with enthusiasm and without victims. But what it concealed in itself, no one had guessed even by nightfall.¹³

After that first night, the soldiers had to join the revolution for the uprising to be successful. Women are involved also in this struggle, even forming the bravest, most heroic divisions of the struggle, and leading it. Trotsky tells like this:

A great role is played by women workers in relationship between workers and soldiers. They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: "Put down your bayonets – join us." The soldiers

12 Özgür, *Cilt 1*, p. 111.

13 Lev Trotskiy, *Rus Devrim Tarihi Cilt 1 Şubat Devrimi: Çarlığın devrilmesi* [*The history of Russian Revolution Volume I February Revolution: The overthrow of the Tsardom*], çev. Bülent Tanatar, İstanbul: 1998, p. 112

are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd. The barrier is opened, a joyous and grateful “Hurrah!” shakes the air. The soldiers are surrounded. Everywhere arguments, reproaches, appeals the revolution makes another forward step.¹⁴

When the Tsar, which seemed to be unshaken, fell after the February revolution which erupted due to women’s struggle, the struggle of women was saluted in *Pravda* with such enthusiastic lines:

Salute to the women!

Salute to the International!

Women were the first to go out to the streets of St. Petersburg on Women’s Day...

Salute to the women!¹⁵

After the February revolution, until the working class took power with the October Revolution, women took an active part both in protecting the achievements of the February revolution and in the struggle to organize the October revolution. They participated in factory committees and militia. *Rabotnitsa*, which was banned in 1914 after the great laundering strike in Petrograd, where 5,000 women workers joined, started to be published again. When they were repressed after the events of July 1917, the only legal publication in the hands of the Bolsheviks was *Rabotnitsa* published every 10 days and 40,000 copies were published.¹⁶

Despite all this aliveness, the prejudices, which have been deeply rooted for centuries, continued to exist. These prejudices did not affect only male workers, they had effects also on Bolsheviks’ base. Women, without any tradition or experience, were organizing effective strikes, and forming strike committees themselves. But even women workers did not believe that women had the capacity to take part in soviets to represent all workers. For instance, even though textile workers were overwhelmingly female, only 2 of the 15 textile workers’ unions’ leaders were woman workers. While half of the workers of Petrograd were women workers, the proportion of female delegates in the soviet organs was only around 5%.¹⁷

When the working class took power with the help of peasants together with the lead of Bolsheviks, on 7 November, according to today’s calendar, 25 October according to old calendar, women participated in the leading of the revolution.

14 Ibid., p. 119.

15 Özgür, *Cilt I*, p. 113.

16 Ibid., p. 116.

17 Rosenberg, p. 98.

And the Soviet power, the product of the greatest victorious worker's revolution of history, was facing a struggle to provide a future for women who have struggled for Soviets in all the toughest conditions, after hundreds of years of reactionary, oppressive traditions, under the dominance of the rules and turning their faces to Bolsheviks with the hope of salvation.

The steps and effects of Soviet power until the domination of the bureaucracy

The Soviet power, from the beginning of its earliest days, immediately passed enactments that annihilated the unjust legislations that kept women under control. However, they did not only give women the rights previously granted to men, they made decisions and laws that would remove the sexist social rules that shook the women and the men, cut the reactionary ties and open the way for the construction of a new society.

Marriage and divorce

Only two months after the October revolution, in December 1917 two enactments about divorce, marriage, women's and men's decree on children were published. Both marriage and divorce made entirely voluntary. Church marriage was not banned, but was invalidated in terms of the legal system. After that, only civil marriage was recognized by law. Registration of church marriages that was made before the revolution, was necessary for them in order to be recognized legally. In this way, the Soviet government attempted to break the influence of the church on the regulation of society's life, while on the other hand it was carrying out this struggle in a careful way, not to hurt people's beliefs.

Obligations for married women such as taking her husband's surname, needing her husband's permission to look for a job and work, were removed. The biggest change those two enactments brought was the provision of equality of marital and non-marital children before the law. Before the October revolution, women did not have a right to demand maintenance for non-marital children, this enactment recognized this right to women and children. Equal right of speak and authority was given to men and women in decisions about children.

Just like marriage, divorce was also monopolized by the church and was extremely difficult. Because it brought a very serious financial burden, it was almost impossible for men from the working classes to use, only men from the upper class could use that right. Women did not have this right anyway. The Soviet power immediately made divorce an equal and extraordinarily easy procedure for both women and men. Application of only one of the parties was enough for divorce. If all the issues were agreed between the parties, application was enough for divorce,

if not agreed, decisions taken at the local court in accordance with the lawsuits. The fact that the parties were not allowed to intervene in each other's life after the divorce can be regarded as one of the important measures of Soviet power against male dominance when the pressures faced by women who are divorced or want to divorce even today is considered.

On October 17, 1918 approximately one year after the revolution, "Code on Marriage, Family and Guardianship" was enacted. This code was based on the separation between the before marriage assets and after marriage assets of spouses. Adoption was banned in order to protect children's rights, especially in rural areas, because of the widespread adoption to be used as labor force and to prevent the craftiness of getting more share in the reorganization of the society by making the family population more crowded. It was declared that children who were adopted before the code, had equal rights with other children. It has been decided that decisions regarding children's education, custody should be taken with mutual agreement of the parents. To discipline children by physical sanction was banned.

This code, accepted in 1918, was valid until a new code was enacted on January 1, 1927, and in the period between the two codes, enactments were introduced which brought some secondary regulations on this area.¹⁸

Abortion right and birth control

By a decree of October 18, 1920, abortion was accepted as a free and legal right for all women on condition that they were performed in state hospitals in the first three months of pregnancy. Thus, **for the first time in the world, women had the right of legal abortion in the territories of the October revolution, under the workers' power.**

The Soviet power was providing an accessible abortion on healthy and hygienic conditions to women who had previously risked their health and took the risk of miscarriage. In the world where the church and the dominant opposition against abortion speaks of "the right to live of the fetus", the decree published by the workers' government puts the right to live and health of the woman at the center and punishes not the abortion but those who risk the woman by illegal abortion. These words were written in the Abortion Decree that claimed in 1920:

But as the moral survivals of the past and the difficult economic conditions

18 We stated that with a decree issued in December 1917, Soviet power abolished the necessity of using the man's surname as the common surname of the spouses. A decree issued in 1921 extended this right and allowed the spouses to use their own surnames or surnames of women/men as common surnames, to give their children their surnames. These kind of and similar resolutions, without making any fundamental changes, have brought new annexes to the law which called Family Code of 1918.

of the present still compel many women to resort to this operation¹⁹, the People's Commissariats of Health and of Justice, anxious to protect the health of the women and considering that the method of repressions in this field fails entirely to achieve this aim, have decided:

1. To permit such operations to be made freely and without any charge in Soviet hospitals, where conditions are assured of minimizing the harm of the operation.
2. It is absolutely forbidden for anyone but a doctor to carry out this operation.
3. Any nurse or midwife found guilty of making such an operation will be deprived of the right to practice, and tried by a People's Court.
4. A doctor carrying out an abortion in his private practice for the purposes of profit will be called to account by a People's Court.²⁰

The Soviet power, in recognition of this right, also carried out propaganda activities in order to state that abortion should not be used as a birth control method and that it is a serious operation involving various risks. The reason Soviet power ran those propaganda activities is because abortion actually became a birth control method due to inadequacy of other birth control methods. It was ordinary for a 30 year old Soviet woman to have abortion on average 5-7 times.²¹ At this point, when it is said that women have a lack of access to contraceptive methods, this point should be emphasized: Many birth control methods used today were not known at the time of the legalization of the abortion, even the birth control pill had not been found yet. Implementation of birth control methods, such as abortion, was prohibited not only in Russia but all over the world, it was a period when scientific work about this topic was banned around the world. In this sense, Soviet Union was the first country to conduct medical research with clear control and support of the state to develop birth control methods in order to minimize the number of abortions and wide-ranging researches to carry out the abortion with the least risks in terms of women's health.

Education

19 Here, the operation refers to hidden and illegal abortion

20 "Soviet Decree on Abortion (1920)", <http://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/soviet-decreon-abortion-1920/>

21 Georges Duby, Michelle Perrot, Françoise Thébaud, *Kadınların tarihi Cilt V: Yirminci Yüzyılda Kültürel Bir Kimliğe Doğru [A History of Women Volume V: Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century]*, çev. Ahmet Fethi, İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2005, p. 230.

In the tsarist Russia, 70 percent of the population was illiterate. This proportion was even higher among peasants and women. In 1920, the rate of illiteracy among the general population was 67% and among women it was 77.5%.²² The Bolsheviks embarked on a great mobilization of the whole society with the “Decree on Eradication of Illiteracy” published in Lenin’s signature on December 26, 1919. Women had to participate in social life and labor force in order to remove the oppression of women and this could only be provided with education. So Bolsheviks went over this topic with a more systematic way.

125 thousand reading and writing schools were established. Many women learnt how to write and read by writing the slogans of Bolsheviks on blackboards.²³ The proportion of illiteracy decreased quickly over the years. In 1932 only 9.2% of woman workers were illiterate, three years later this proportion fell below 6%.²⁴ In the tsarist period, even among women from the upper classes, the proportion of high education was very low. This was because girl students were not accepted in most of the universities, girls from rich families could only get higher education abroad. Ten years after the October revolution a completely different picture showed up. During 1927-28, 28% of the students who were studying at the university were girl students. Approximately a decade later, in 1939-40, this number rose to 49.3%.²⁵

It is necessary to say that the breakthrough in the field of education is the effect of tens of thousands of women coming to the cities from the villages and learning to read and write in the factories. At that time Education Committees were established in the factories. Not only literacy was taught in these committees, but also many activities in the field of culture and art were organized. Workers organized various theatrical works, poem reading nights, organized orchestras and performed concerts themselves. Effect of this situation is mentioned in a source as follows:

Both man and woman workers began to flock to theaters, ballets and concerts, which were formerly privileged areas of the upper classes. In the art, a situation such as this had arisen, as if every person was taking a brush and putting a picture. Experiments were being conducted in every area of life. In 1918, schools opened a month later than the summer holidays, as teachers had to search for solutions in a series of discussions and develop an arrangement to develop the new education of future founders of socialism according to the most modern methods of the most advanced educators in the world. At every corner, discussions were

22 Serebrennikov, G.N., “The position of women in the U.S.S.R”, 1937, p. 80. <http://revolutionarydemocracy.org/archive/womenUSSR.pdf>

23 Rosenberg, p. 104.

24 Serebrennikov, p. 80.

25 Nina Popova, *Sosyalizm diyarında kadın [Women in the Land of Socialism]*, çev. Murat Güneşdoğdu- İsmail Yarkın, İstanbul: İnter Yayınları, 1999, p. 70.

being held in every aspect of the world.²⁶

Family and care work

One of the prerequisites for the emancipation of women for the leadership of the October revolution was to join the social labor force, and the other was to collectivize the household affairs that keep them in the house. They were moving from the idea that without these two, it would not be possible for women to build their own future together with the new society. In this direction, a series of steps were taken after the revolution. Maternity houses, child care centers, laundry facilities, laundry repairs and sewing centers and dining halls were opened. House-communes were established for people living alone and married couples. These collective centers were opening up within opportunities, their numbers have only increased over time. For this reason, long-term steps were taken to collectivize housekeeping and care work, while ideologically struggling against sexist division of labor within the family. Domestic housework, sick, child, and elderly care were accepted as duties of women as a habit of a well-established male-dominated society; and these habits were continuing even in the homes of the party militants. Lenin insisted on this issue, generally within the working class, but especially within the party. Clara Zetkin quotes Lenin's words in *Reminiscences of Lenin*:

Unfortunately it is still true to say of many of our comrades, 'scratch a Communist and find a Philistine.' Of course, you must scratch the sensitive spot, their mentality as regards woman. Could there be a more damning proof of this than the calm acquiescence of men who see how women grow worn out in the petty, monotonous household work, their strength and time dissipated and wasted, their minds growing narrow and stale, their hearts beating slowly, their will weakened? Of course, I am not speaking of the ladies of the bourgeoisie who shove on to servants the responsibility for all household work, including the care of children. What I am saying applies to the overwhelming majority of women, to the wives of workers and to those who stand all day in a factory.

So few men – even among the proletariat – realize how much effort and trouble they could save women, even quite do away with, if they were to lend a hand in 'woman's work.' But no, that is contrary to the 'right and dignity of a man.' They want their peace and comfort. The home life of the woman is a daily sacrifice to a thousand unimportant trivialities. The old master right of the man still lives in secret.²⁷

In addition to this ideological struggle, it should be emphasized that even though

²⁶ Rosenberg, s. 105.

²⁷ Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 1924, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1924/reminiscences-of-lenin.htm>

the steps taken for the collective centers were inadequate in terms of both quantity and quality and in terms of meeting the need, but that the young workers' state did not abandon these steps within the opportunities.

Between 1917 and 1926, the number of nurseries, first in the Soviet Russia (briefly RSFSR) and after in the Soviet Union as a whole was as follows:²⁸

Year	RSFSR	USSR
1917	14	-
1918	78	-
1919	126	-
1920	565	-
1921	668	769
1922	914	967
1923	447	535
1924	503	615
1925	536	708
1926	610	824

We see in this table that the number of nurseries was constantly increasing from 1917 to 1922, and the number has fallen between 1922 and 1923. While it is not possible to exactly explain the reason of this regression, it can be thought as a result of the application of the NEP period to the market or the change and/or centralization of the nursery system. After 1923, the continuous-rising tendency is reemerging. If we look at the longer term, we can say that the capacity in child care has reached a very high level in the USSR over the years.²⁹

	1914	1937
Number of beds in regular nurseries	550	627.817
Number of birth centers	9	4.175
Total number of visits per year in birth centers (thousands)	44	39.300
Number of baby nutrition centers (milk kitchens)	-	1.509

Dining halls were opened for the collectivization of house work. In 1919-1920

²⁸ Özgür, *Cilt 2*, p. 28.

²⁹ Popova, p. 81.

90% of the Petrograd population, 60% of the Moscow population, a total of 12 million people were eating in these dining halls.³⁰ When we look at the figures for 1932, this number was around 15 million in the Soviet Union and about 30 million cups of food were served every day.³¹

Despite these numbers, it is important to emphasize that women were also resisting the new system with their old habits. Because of the fact that the food in the collective centers were unsatisfactory, the careless use of common materials, the disorganized and inadequate conditions; women did not leave their individual pots.³² Trotsky explains the environment created by people who have not yet absorbed the collective life and have been kneaded by the old society like this: “Many houses which had been allotted to families living in communes got into filthy conditions and became uninhabitable. People living in them did not consider communistic housing as a beginning of new conditions. They looked upon their dwellings as upon barracks provided by the state.”³³

Regardless of the emerging picture, it should be emphasized here that, from the first day of the workers’ state, the state was aware of the double burden women carries on their shoulders, and has tried to socialize this burden by lifting it from the shoulders of women. The labor the woman spends in the house has never been invisible to the Bolsheviks.

Participation in the workforce

The policy of the October revolution and of its leaders, especially Lenin, was based on the idea that factors such as illiteracy which hinder women from being a part of the social production have to be abolished in order to open the way for the salvation of women. In this respect, the enactments issued immediately after the October Revolution brought regulations that enables women to have equal rights with men in this area instead of laws of pre-revolution Russia that was prohibiting women from participating in the labor force.

Of course, the primary of them was equal right to work and equal pay for equal work. In 1914, daily wage of women was only 44% of men’s daily wage.³⁴ With the October revolution, sex-based discrimination in wage classifications has been abolished and forbidden. Although this equality was provided in the law and different charges were not applied for the same job, when the year 1918 came, the

30 Rosenberg, p. 103.

31 Serebrennikov, p. 68.

32 Ibid., p. 170.

33 Ibid., p. 172.

34 Serebrennikov, p. 11.

average wage of women was only half of the average wage of men.³⁵ However, this did not arise from the fact that the principle of “equal pay for equal work” was not practically applied. This occurred because of the fact that women were working in less qualified jobs, in sectors that require less training, and because wages in these sectors were lower than in other areas.

Is it possible to say that the separation of women’s job and men’s job in the field of social production in the young workers’ state continues? Yes. Is it because the workers’ state has a sexist understanding of this issue? No. Bolsheviks were trying to attract women, who are mostly illiterate and have not received vocational training, to the social production and as a result women have been employed in fields where they can do their best known work in the direction of the centuries’ old sexist division of labor in society. In other words, since women were not competent enough to work in qualified jobs right after the revolution, discrimination between women’s work and men’s work was a necessity. But it is often repeated in decisions taken by Soviet organs that this is a situation that needs to be changed when building a new society, and more importantly, a conscious and organized struggle was carried out to make women’s labor more qualified. Only four days after the October Revolution, October 29, 1917, the decision to ban the employment of women in more than 50 jobs threatening their health can be considered as one of the reasons for this distinction. But this prohibition was abolished in the next period as mechanization increased in the industry, the decisiveness of physical power was reduced, and hygienic working conditions for women’s health were provided.³⁶ The Soviet Union has become the country where the female labor force was used the most in the professions which are seen as “male jobs”. The numbers in the mining sector, where almost only male workers are working even today, are striking, especially when compared to numbers from various Western countries in similar years:

Women play a very negligible role in capitalist mining industry. The proportion of women to the total numbers employed in the mining industries is, for France (1931), 2.7 per cent; for Italy (1931), 1.8 per cent; for Germany (1932), 1.0 per cent; USA (1930), 0.6 per cent; and in Great Britain, 0.6 per cent. In the USSR women represent 27.9 per cent of the total number of people working in the mining industry.³⁷

In order to make women’s labor more qualified, basic training and vocational training was carried out in the factories while women’s higher education was sup-

35 Özgür, *Cilt 1*, p. 49.

36 Serebrennikov, p. 6.

37 Tony Cliff, “Class Struggle and Women’s Liberation”, 1984, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1984/women/09-revrus.htm>

ported at the same time. In the decade after the revolution, women were forming nearly one-third of the university students. Even though it was almost impossible to find a female engineer or technician before the revolution, and only 3 of 848 engineers in Petersburg were women in 1899, according to the 1939 census, 24.000 of 76.000 engineers in the country were women. More than 1 million women worked in the medical field, and 126.000 of them were doctors. However, before the revolution there were only 2.000 female doctors in Russia.³⁸

In Russia before the revolution, one of the biggest obstacles to women's participation in the labor force was pregnancy and childbirth. As mentioned above, female workers had to work by hiding their pregnancies, they were taken out of the job when they are noticed or worked at the workbench almost until birth. This situation caused woman and infant deaths during childbirth. Since women started to work immediately after birth, they could not get enough care and sometimes infant deaths were happening because of starving. One of the first enactments after the revolution was about this topic. It was forbidden for pregnant women to be employed in tiring jobs, to be removed from work, and to be sent to other work places without their own consent. Women were granted a 16-week mandatory pregnancy, birth and maternity leave. In some jobs or in twin infant pregnancies, this period could be extended. During this leave period, it was mandatory to pay the women in full rate. Thus, it was aimed that this right should not be left on paper, and that the necessity of actually working for the women not to emerge. Women who began to work after maternity leave and continued to breastfeed were given breastfeeding break every 3.5 hours that was excepted as work hours with no less than half an hour each. Mothers and children have the right to free health care in hospitals and clinics, and if there is no place for the sick child, the doctor will give the mother a paid leave during the illness of the child. The decisions that started immediately after the revolution and were taken at various times were systematized with the Labor Act, accepted in 1922; this represented the most developed rights that women had all around the world in this area.³⁹

Participation in political life

38 Popova, p. 73. (In the book, the author didn't write the exact year, instead wrote "50 years ago". Since it was published in 1949, 1899 was written as our assumption)

39 Rosenberg, p. 101. It can be said that these rights are highly advanced even after 100 years, even the rights of women in the most developed capitalist societies are taken into account. Even today, in many countries women are fighting for these rights. It cannot even be said that none of these countries can provide same state guarantee that can be provided by the workers' state. The only criticism to the workers' state may be that they cannot impose an inalienable paternity leave among all these decisions. However, this criticism can be made because we have had a 100-year more experience after the October revolution.

The October revolution has been a first in the world in terms of women's participation in politics. Many sources tell that after the October revolution, women were given equal rights to elect and be elected, adding that "these rights existed only in Norway and Denmark at that time." However, in those two countries, it was the right to vote which came to the agenda with the Suffragette movement rising all over the world. In 1913 in Norway, in Denmark in 1915, women had only the right to vote. **For the first time in the world, women in Russia have the equal right to vote and stand for election with men.**⁴⁰

Moreover, this right was obtained during the events of July after the February revolution, on the eve of the October revolution. And after the revolution, the young workers' state also made a great effort to use it in practice, not just a right written on paper.

In the summer of 21 February 1920, published in *Pravda* under the title "Women workers", Lenin said:

Where there are no landlords, capitalists and merchants, where the government of the toilers is building a new life without these exploiters, there equality between women and men exists in law.

But that is not enough!

It is a far cry from equality in law to equality in life.

We want women workers to achieve equality with men workers not only in law, but in life as well. For this, it is essential that women workers take an ever increasing part in the administration of public enterprises and in the administration of the state.

By engaging in the work of administration women will learn quickly and they will catch up with the men!

Therefore, elect more women workers, both Communist and non-Party, to the Soviet. If she is only an honest woman worker who is capable of managing work sensibly and conscientiously, it makes no difference if she is not a member of the Party--elect her to the Moscow Soviet!

Let there be more women workers in the Moscow Soviet! Let the Moscow proletariat show that it is prepared to do and is doing everything for the fight to victory, for the fight against the old inequality, against the old, bourgeois, humiliation of women!

The proletariat cannot achieve complete

⁴⁰ Finland is the first country in the world where women joined the parliament. In the elections held in 1907, 19 parliamentary deputies were elected to the 200-seat parliament. In Russia, the age of election started at 18, while in Finland it was 24. The principle of equal voting and the right to stand for elections, regardless of gender, applied only to parliamentary elections. Municipal elections were subject to property-based distinctions. More importantly, women did not have equal rights with men. It was only in 1930 that married women had equal rights with their husbands (Jason Lavery, *The History of Finland*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006, p. 77).

freedom, unless it achieves complete freedom for women!⁴¹

They were calling on women who were half of the society but who have been ignored for centuries to join the administration of the country. They were also struggling against the oppression of the educational traditions, and to the prejudices of the past. Of course the Bolsheviks were aware that this was a difficult task, but it was an irreplaceable task too. This perspective can be seen in its most striking form in Lenin's article, "Will the Bolsheviks be able to hold it in the hands of power?": "We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration... However, we demand that the task of managing the country be taught immediately to all cooks."⁴²

These efforts of the Bolsheviks at the level of propaganda and agitation were supported by educational groups established in factories and villages. This systematic work has begun to bear its fruits from the first years of the revolution. Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of women were joining the ranks of the revolution. Here, delegate meetings were used as an important tool to ensure that women who had never been involved in politics, joins the soviets and the party. The delegate meetings system worked like this: In every factory, in every neighborhood, in every village, all women were invited to a meeting, an average delegate for every 40-50 women was selected for the centralization of the topics discussed at these meetings, these delegates were attending the district delegate meetings. After the women were selected, they were delegates for periods ranging from 3 to 6 months. Women who were elected as delegates were sent to politics schools. In 1922, every 10 women were represented by a delegate so that more and more women could be included in this system. In 1925, the organizational proposal presented at the 14th Congress of the party shows how massive the delegate meetings were:

The most important feature of the reporting period is - as in all other organizational fields - the development of delegate meetings to take a massive form. We note that during the reporting period women's electors of women delegates increased in the city and in the village. The number of female voters in the city increased by 30% during the reporting period, a total of 1,600,000. However, the number of female voters in the village has increased by 70%, a total of 7,000,000... Significant progress has been made in the participation of women in soviets, executive committees and congresses. The proportion of women in the village soviets increased from 2% to 9%, from 0.6% to 7% in provincial executive committees and from 4% to 7% in provincial executive committees. There is also an increase

41 V. I. Lenin, "To the working Women" 1920, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/feb/21.htm>.

42 St. George, p. 23.

in the percentage of women in the unions as well, unfortunately this is not a rapid progress. In the union enterprise commissions, from 14% to 16.5%, but there is a more remarkable increase in the central committees of unions, from 4% to 15%.⁴³

Vladimir Mayakovski tells the truth that women are becoming an increasingly larger part of political life, showing themselves in the organizational numbers that was presented in the congress:

From turning machines
from plows
hundreds of thousands of lean women
with red kerchiefs
learning to set up
and to manage⁴⁴

These developments are also confirmed by the increase in the proportion of women party members to number of total party members.⁴⁵

Year	Ratio of woman members (%)	
1898	15	I. Congress (RSDLP)
1918	7,8	VII. Congress (RCP/B)
1924	9	XIII. Congress (CPSU)
1925	10,3	XIV. Congress (CPSU)
1927	13	XV. Congress(CPSU)

The fact that the first congress has the highest percentage of female members, in 1918 this proportion would be almost half of the 1898 ratio and then it started to increase attracts attention. The reason for that is the fact that in its establishment phase, the party was formed mostly of intellectuals and could not access workers yet. During the revolution, and almost immediately after it, the party grew among the workers, and because men had to participate in much larger masses, in 1918 the women ratio was almost as half of the first congress, but then the party gained strength step-by-step among women.

Let's close this title by referring to a last point. Although the party carried out a

43 Özgür, *Cilt 1*, p. 171.

44 St. George, p. 32.

45 Özgür, *Cilt 1*, p. 149.

conscious effort to acquire women into politics before and after the October revolution, it is not possible to say that the same consciousness was achieved by all the party militants and all Soviet representatives. Even the party members did speak big when it came to the idiom about the emancipation of women, but in reality they were trying to prevent their spouses from participating in party activities and sometimes banned it. The words of a woman facing a similar situation are striking in terms of summarizing this situation:

Because he was afraid that I would become a real person - all he needed was a chef and a housewife-, who forbid me, and I had to sneak in secretly to the meetings, where he was talking about the function of the woman in thunderous remarks and urging women to take on more effective tasks.⁴⁶

Party leaders have approached this issue sensitively in the party and in the Soviets and struggled for men to abandon prejudices of the past, to end the oppression on women, to change the living conditions of women in the family. In his article “From the Old Family to the New” dated July 13, 1923, Trotsky said:

To institute the political equality of men and women in the Soviet state was one problem and the simplest... But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an infinitely more arduous problem. All our domestic habits must be revolutionized before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family, in a normal sense as well as in the conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality in social work or even in politics. As long as woman is chained to her housework, the care of the family, the cooking and sewing, all her chances of participation in social and political life are cut down in the extreme.⁴⁷

In the first years of the October revolution, as we have tried to convey in the general lines above, a very serious breakthrough has taken place. All of the necessary steps for the salvation of women were written in the program and the Bolsheviks tried to progress in this direction. If they put a goal and failed, it was because at those days the young workers’ state was struggling for existence, the period of war communism against the whites and the impossibilities caused by the civil war. We would like to touch on two specific topics below, before discussing what was going on in this area in the next period. One of these is the experience of Zhenotdel, the women’s organization of the party, which has a special

46 Rowbotham, p. 173.

47 Lev Trotsky, “From the Old Family to the New”, 1923, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/women/life/23_07_13.htm.

place in the participation and organization of women in party activity. The other is the meaning of the October revolution and its product, the workers' state, for Muslim women.

Zhenotdel Experience

Actually the roots of Zhenotdel are based on a brochure named *Woman as a worker* written by Krupskaya at 1900. Since that date, with the conscious efforts of Krupskaya, Armand and Kollontai, activities among the woman workers continued. Various local workers' groups of women were created. *Rabotnitsa* was used as a center of attraction and tool of organization. After the October revolution, one of the objectives of the new society was to move this organized struggle one step forward, thus allowing the workers' power to take steps that will result with the salvation of women.

In 1918, Kollontai's proposal to organize the First All-Russia Congress of Women Workers and Peasants was accepted. A committee of names such as Armand, Kollontai, Sverdlov took on the task of organizing this congress. Although 300 delegates were expected to attend, over a 1.000 appeared, a motley array of red-kerchiefed women - mostly workers - wearing sheepskins, colorful local costumes, or army greatcoats.⁴⁸ After Kollontai and Armand, Lenin came out to the stage with applause from the crowd and after Lenin's speech women sang the International march with great enthusiasm. This congress was followed by commissions that would later become the local organs of Zhenotdel. Finally, at the 8th Congress of the party which held in 1919, Zhenotdel, which means "Women's Section", was founded as a women's organization affiliated to the central committee and Innesa Armand became the first president of Zhenotdel.

Special forms of departments are created for the special forms of the Party (for national issues, for women, for youth etc.) These departments are formed at the level of Party committees and are directly connected to committees. The organization scheme of these departments is determined by specific guidelines approved by the Central Committee.⁴⁹

22 full-time women militants were stationed in the headquarters which is at

48 Richard Stites, "Zhenotdel: Bolshevism and Russian Women, 1917-1930", *Russian History*, Vol. 3, No: 2, 1976, p. 177.

49 From the statute accepted in 8th All-Russia Conference of the RCP(b) between 2-4 December 1919, Özgür, *Cilt 2, Belgeler Bölümü [Documents Section]*, p. 6. (The author has included several documents as a separate section at the end of the second volume of the book, which also starts with a page number from 1. In the following pages, the references belong to this section will be written as written in this reference.)

Moscow. Zhenotdel, cooperated with various organizations in the issues that concern women. Mother and Child Unit, health commissioner, Commissions against Prostitution, Komsomol and Soviet's sub-departments are only some part of the organizations that Zhenotdel cooperated. *Rabotnitsa* acted as the central media organ and the *Kommunistka* (Communist Woman) was published in the field of the theory, which was issued under the leadership of Krupskaya. Brochures in various topics, internal bulletins, magazines prepared by local organizations were published. For instance in 1930, *Peasant Woman*, *Delegate*, *Red Siberian Woman* and 18 more magazines were published 670 thousand times, and these magazines were used for propaganda purposes and used as an organization tool among the workers and villagers.⁵⁰

The party's expectation from Zhenotdel was divided into two. First, the acquisition of more women in the ranks of the revolution so that the needs of the workers' state can be fulfilled, and the second was the struggle against factors seen as obstacles for women's salvation in the newly established society.

In line with this perspective Zhenotdel worked for the Red Army and the mobilization of women to defend the revolution during the civil war. Zhenotdel's agitation and propaganda teams roamed almost all of Russia, with trains and trips on boats along the Volga River, where they settled in tents. They encouraged women to participate in subbotniks. After Armand's death in 1920, Kollontai took over the presidency of Zhenotdel and Zhenotdel's struggle to that time was extended especially to the geographical area where Muslim women lived. As mentioned above, we will try to explain the work done in these regions as a separate section below. It should be emphasized that Zhenotdel militants were fighting at the expense of their lives for the salvation of these women who suffered enormously because of the cruel and horrible customs in the Soviet territories. Zhenotdel militants carry on their activities even though they got beaten or massacred in the villages they visit.

From the very beginning Zhenotdel was the reason of a two-way debate and struggle within the party. On the one hand there was a tendency that believed Zhenotdel is unnecessary in transitional conditions and they believed Zhenotdel should be abolished. On the other side there was a tendency to turn Zhenotdel into an independent structure from the Party and both of these arguments had a counter argument which created a struggle within the Party.

Before the 16th Party Congress, held in 1930 which was after the domination of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, Zhenotdel and its affiliated organizations were closed and the given reason was "reorganizing the party mechanism." The organizational report presented by the Central Committee to the party congress alleged that

⁵⁰ Stites, p. 183.

this decision didn't create any weakening among the women studies:

I have to underline here that the reorganization of the Party mechanism has led to a tendency for the elimination of women's branches and disassemble women work. In my view, this reorganization of the Party does not mean that it has to undermine the working of women at all. On the contrary, work among women has to be accelerated. If the work among women is a "special" task that "transferred" to the woman branches, then after the reorganization of the Party, the whole Party organization is obliged to deal with women, to work among women in order to add them to the Party.⁵¹

The result, however, is that the content of the work between women changes direction, and Zhenotdel's steps towards women's salvation are also fed to the bureaucracy's interests. Between 1917 and 1930, 301 articles were found in various decisions and resolutions concerning women's rights and demands; between 1930 and 1967, this figure was only 3.⁵²

The October revolution was also the revolution of the Muslim Women

Considering in terms of Russia in general, the women living in societies which were called as the People of East, were the women who lived under the toughest circumstances especially due to religious pressures and traditions before the revolution. The revolution's one assignment ahead was to make these women's lives livable, to ensure that they cease to be women waiting for rescue then become the subject of this struggle. The rights that were recognized to all women after the October Revolution, were also valid for women living in these lands, although women living in the East were not even aware of which rights they possessed let alone using these rights.

Workers' State first of all made a stride to specify the content and form of the work among these women. In 1921 "Conference of Communist Women and Organizers of the East" was arranged for the attendance of the women in the region who were going to carry on organizing activity. In the conference where provinces formed by Tatar, Bashkir, Turkistan, Azerbaijan, Crimea, Kirghizstan, Caucasia, Siberia, Turk, and other peoples from mountains were represented, 45 organizer women gathered.⁵³ Zhenotdel, which had been established a while before this conference had already begun its activities in the region. Unfortunately, communist

51 L.M. Kaganoviç, "*XVI. Parti Kongresi'ne Merkez Komitesi'nin Örgütsel Raporu*" [The Organizational Report of the Central Committee to the 16th Congress of the Party], Özgür, *ibid.*, p. 21.

52 Rosenberg, p. 124.

53 Kollontay, p. 365.

women paid the price of learning the region's circumstances and how the organizing activity should be carried out in the region with their lives. Among the years 1918-1919, hundreds of women who went from Russia's West to carry out activity in these regions, were killed due to the provocations of the mullahs in these regions. The passage in a Zhenotdel administrator's letter strikingly explains what kinds of difficulties the women have confronted but at the same time how much determination they have performed:

One afternoon we went to an Aul (smaller settlement from the village) around Poltorazk. Me, a girl student of East University and a woman from the militia. We went directly to the mukhtar's house, there were three men. They were drinking tea. After the mukhtar heard what we said, he said, 'You cannot have a meeting with our women, their husbands will not let you.' In the meantime, however, one of the men blinked at him and said in the Turkmen language: 'Do not send them back, they can be useful tonight.' I understand Turkmen language very well but I pretended like I did not understand. So we did a night watch all night, with guns in our hands. The mukhtar who saw our stubbornness and capability to protect ourselves, changed his mind the next day and called the women to the meeting.⁵⁴

Women who don't go outside their houses, who don't go to the marketplace in order not to run into men, of course were not attending to the meetings which Zhenotdels arranged. Thereupon, Zhenotdel began to try different methods. Established women's clubs. In order for women to attend easily, entrance of men to the club got strictly banned. Nevertheless, women under chador whose identities could not be understood, were waiting outside these clubs' doors prior to entering, watching around fearing that someone could see. In order to reach the women Zhenotdel members even ran grocery stores in these regions, in these grocery stores only women were working, "men are not allowed to enter" posters were hung on the grocery store's window and when there is a woman who enters the store for shopping, the communist women tries to inspire awareness through chatting with her.⁵⁵

The activities carried out in the East primarily was aimed at informing women about the new laws and the rights they possess. In addition to this, reading-writing courses, health services and various socio-cultural activities were being arranged. Differently from the rest of the country in the East ensuring women's participation to work force, hence integrating women into professional education was requiring a much more difficult and long struggle.

54 Fannina W. Halle, *Frauen des Ostens : vom Matriarchat bis zu den Fliegerinnen von Baku*, Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1938, p. 133, Özgür, *Cilt:2*, p. 111.

55 Ibid., p. 111.

Women's most basic demands were the forbiddance of getting young girls married off at a very little age, polygamy (in this case the man's ability to marry more than one woman) and bride wealth. It was relevant that they were prompted to accept polygamy due to the economic difficulties they confronted because it took time to break the traditions and women's participation to workforce was very limited. The ones who demand or pay bride wealth were being punished, were even being exposed in newspapers. In addition to this, as Zhenotdel's activities expanded, as it began to enhance its effect, the women had started to achieve the awareness of their rights and even if it was slowly they had started to use these rights. They were using their rights to divorce rising up against their husbands who beat them up and enforce polygamy.

Serious progress has been made in the field of literacy. They also came very far in terms of using their political rights, but they were closing the gap quickly. In 1924-25, 27% of women participated in city soviet elections. Only 2% of the selected delegates to the Soviet Congress in 1920 were women, but in 1931 it increased to 23.2%.⁵⁶

One of the important topics of struggle in the East was the struggle against chador and veil. They were approaching the topic with a great attention and rigor, considering that struggle against communist women's veiling themselves through law and forbiddance would not produce results, on the contrary it would hinder their progress. The approach towards the topic, found its best expression in these words of Lenin:

We must be extremely careful in fighting religious prejudices; some people cause a lot of harm in this struggle by offending religious feelings. We must use propaganda and education. By lending too sharp an edge to the struggle we may only arouse popular resentment; such methods of struggle tend to perpetuate the division of the people along religious lines, whereas our strength lies in unity.⁵⁷

With this perspective Zhenotdel carried out an activity against chador and veil because of reasons like it is a tradition that disregarded women's dignity, harmed their health, women could not work in factories because they wore chador therefore they could not use their rights against their husbands since they did not possess any economic power and although they wore or forced to wear chador or veil due to their religious beliefs, veiling oneself was not written in Quran, this tradition was

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 116.

⁵⁷ V. I. Lenin, "Speech at the First All-Russia Congress of Working Women", 1918 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/nov/19.htm>.

brought afterwards. 8th March of 1926, with the slogan of “Down With Burqa and Paranja”, was a historical day for the worker women of the East. A woman who was experiencing this protest tells that day in this way:

Today, thousands of, ten thousands of women flowed through the streets of Middle Asia- Samarkand, Bukhara, Tashkent, Kokand etc.-with their burqas and paranjas - and their preparations had started several months in advance- like an enormous and dangerous avalanche. But there was a sea of flags on this dark and directionless crowd: A protest against a hatred tradition. And in the middle of this weird walk, just like a red flower parcel on a bare and weeded land, a group of women walked in with open faces, red-kerchiefs, and with determined steps: The one that already shown the courage to draw a line to their past and the ones that do not have to look to the sky behind the black cage anymore! The mass of people that cannot be unseen, accompanied by music, took their place in the square decorated with flags along with many men and children in their ranks, and women began to wait in a breathtaking thrill. Then the massive rally started. New, unconventional words were rising, enchanting but encouraging, spurring the tribune surrounding the square. Words that create an endless enthusiasm for the hearts... And when the strengthening storm was not able to calm down and the cries of ‘Live Long’ spread from the old, ruined city walls to the wilderness – that is when the attack began. Here, there, flying! Initially shaky and shy, but then with increasing enthusiasm, women throw out the symbols of slavery in front of the public - burqas and paranjas! They quickly stacked them up like a rising mountain, poured gasoline on them and suddenly flames started to be seen, flames of the liberation of the land from centennial tradition has begun to rise to the glittering sky... But in the face of this unprecedented fire, women’s hearts were flaming with fear, joy and shame those women who dare to show their faces for the first time since their childhood, who have survived from the prison...⁵⁸

In the days that prepared the October Revolution, throughout the revolution and even in the earlier stages after the revolution Eastern women were not part of this process. Nevertheless the October Revolution also became their voice and as it took steps to organize their liberation Eastern women also listened to this voice.

Two steps forward, one step back: Thermidor and after

After everything that been explained above, can we say that the Soviet woman, who had the most advanced rights in the world in many areas, had emancipated? There is one objective answer to this question: No! Why? Because some of the rights that have been given to women immediately right after the revolution, were withdrawn in the following years. The leap in the early years was a very important

58 Özgür, *Cilt:2*, p. 135.

beginning, but it wasn't permanent. Reputation of some structures that fed by the oppression of women was restored. In this case, if socialism, unlike capitalism, don't get along with male domination and if this ideology believes in genderless society, it must be explained why some steps have been taken against women under the control of the workers' state and that some rights are withdrawn. Before we explain this situation, briefly let's see how and when changes are made.

The first step back was not just only about women, the NEP (New Economic Policy), which included mandatory steps back in the revolutionary program was accepted in order to keep the workers' state alive. The inadequacy of resources led to the closure of some of the dining halls, laundries, kindergartens, child and patient care centers that been opened for women's participation in social production and the collectivization of the invisible labor of women. Then, in 1928, with the First Five-Year Plan, the priorities of the community changed almost instantaneously.

In 1930 party's women department Zhenotdel was shut down because the party believed there is no need for a special work on this area. A number of arrangements related to birth have been changed. The principle of receiving full pay during maternity leave started to depend on various conditions. Women who worked in the last three years before birth, those who spent the last two years in their last job and the women who are members of a union had the right to take their full salary. The paid leave period, which was 8 weeks of prenatal care and 8 to 12 weeks after delivery, was reduced to 5 weeks and then to 4 weeks.

There was a need for a large controlled population in order to increase the production. For this a new way of thinking, a new ideology should be adopted to the society. The easiest way was to revitalize the old habits. In 27 June 1936, a decree called "Defense of the Mother and Child" was published and with this decree, family concept got promoted by the government, motherhood encouraged, therefore a special mission was given to the women. With this decree and further strengthening of this decree in 1944, the concepts and the prejudices of the tsarist era become an agenda again. The importance of family was emphasized again and again. Equality between officially registered relationships and actual relationships has been abolished. Concepts such as adultery, out-of-marriage and illegitimate children had been raised again. The idea that the family, not the society, was responsible for the child's education was propagated. Divorce has become a costly process that workers' families cannot afford. Homosexuality was banned, defined as a crime punishable by imprisonment. Abortion was also banned. However, the prohibition on paper, of course, posed a serious threat to women's health and life because prohibition did not prevent women from having an abortion. Of the 100 thousand women who died in the cities, the reason of 12.7 of them were abortion procedures

that were secretly conducted.⁵⁹

In line with the policy aimed at reaching a large population, it was difficult to divorce, homosexuality and abortion was prohibited and also government encourage society to have more children. Having lots of children was rewarded with medals and some financial support. Those with 5-6 children were given the “First and Second Class Motherhood Medal”, those with 7-9 children were given the “First, Second and Third Class Motherhood Honor”, and those with children over 10 had the title of “Mother Heroine.” Not only crowded families were rewarded, but at the same time, small families, individuals with no family, were being punished with additional taxes. Women’s right to demand the father to take on the care of non-marital children was omitted. The coeducation was ended in 1944 in order to consolidate the social role of girls and boys in the new “Soviet family”, and for 10 years girls and boys educated in separate schools.

It is not possible to understand how this change occurred from radical moves in order to ensure the freedom of all working class and the oppressed after the October Revolution to stagnancy, separately from the changes occurring within the Soviet Union. The bureaucratic counter-revolution that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, that is, the bureaucracy that emerged from the working class, which developed its own privileges and which took political power into its hands then started to take actions against both women and workers under the rule of Stalin. The workers’ state which is now under the control of the bureaucracy, was degenerated while protecting its own existence at the expense of overthrowing the workers from power over time and finally opening the gateway to the return of capitalism.⁶⁰ The reestablishment and exaltation of the reactionary and sexist social relations, also took place parallel with this corruption. And under the rule of the bureaucracy, it is not just a little backward step of necessity like in the NEP period it goes beyond that. More importantly, the Stalinist bureaucracy presents them as values of the new society, not as “back steps”.

The sacrifice of the salvation of women along with the working class to the interests of the bureaucracy should not lead us to the conclusion that the October revolution did not have a program that can provide salvation to women. Because the October Revolution has shown it has the proper program with the decrees that been published only 4 days after the revolution. And since 1930’s the main subject was not the steps that taken backwards, but the steps that taken the program of

59 Rosenberg, p. 123.

60 It’s impossible to analyze the control of bureaucracy in Soviet Union and its betrayal to working class and revolution. *The Revolution Betrayed*, by Trotsky, is like a masterpiece to be read in this regard. Also see the articles written by Sungur Savran and Özgür Öztürk, published in *Devrimci Marksizm Volume 28/29*

revolution on completely different road. Trotsky is one of the two great leaders of the October revolution, the only defender of the Soviet state and the program of the October Revolution among the former staff against the bureaucratic corruption and we want to pass on some passages from Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*:

The draft of the law forbidding abortion was submitted to so-called universal popular discussion, and even through the fine sieve of the Soviet press many bitter complaints and stifled protests broke out. The discussion was cut off as suddenly as it had been announced, and on June 27th the Central Executive Committee converted the shameful draft into a thrice shameful law... In reality the new law against women—with an exception in favor of ladies—is the natural and logical fruit of an Thermidorian reaction.⁶¹

The retreat not only assumes forms of disgusting hypocrisy, but also is going infinitely farther than the iron economic necessity demands... The most compelling motive of the present cult of the family is undoubtedly the need of the bureaucracy for a stable hierarchy of relations, and for the disciplining of youth by means of 40 million points of support for authority and power.⁶²

The genuinely socialist family, from which society will remove the daily vexation of unbearable and humiliating cares, will have no need of any regimentation, and the very idea of laws about abortion and divorce will sound no better within its walls than the recollection of houses of prostitution or human sacrifices. The October legislation took a bold step in the direction of such a family. Economic and cultural backwardness has produced a cruel reaction. The Thermidorian legislation is beating a retreat to the bourgeois models, covering its retreat with false speeches about the sacredness of the “new” family. On this question, too, socialist bankruptcy covers itself with hypocritical respectability.⁶³

And with all these findings, Trotsky said that the women whom the Stalinist bureaucracy proclaimed as “free and equal girls of the peoples of the USSR” were “not yet free”.⁶⁴ There were steps taken for the salvation of women however under bureaucracy's rule these steps come to an end.

Here, we will not go into detail about the developments that happened on the following years and until the collapse of the Soviet Union. However it is necessary to emphasize that, after the Second World War and after the politics of large population target had changed, some new arrangements and improvements were made, starting in the late 1950's. After Stalin's death, abortion was legalized again. Even

61 Lev Trotsky, İhanete Uğrayan Devrim [*The Revolution Betrayed*], p. 207.

62 Ibid., s. 209.

63 Ibid., p. 212.

64 Ibid., p. 212.

though it is a part of the bureaucratic structure, a women's organization was established under the name Women Soviet. Instead of putting the perspective of building a better life for women in the center, the bureaucracy saw women as a source of power, in terms of the competition of the Soviet Union with the West. However, many of the steps that were taken for this purpose indirectly led to improvements in women's life. For example, they thought that for a stronger economy, it was necessary for women to participate more in the workforce. In World War II, the death of 20 million people, most of whom were men, made this participation a necessity. Along with this direction, since the second half of the 1950's, the number of nurseries, nursing homes, etc. had been increased.

More emphasis was placed on women's education. As a result, for example, in 1970, there were no women under the age of 50 who were illiterate. In Turkey according to TÜİK's 2015 data, the rate of illiteracy in women over 25 years is 9%. After World War II, women's participation in the economy in the USSR rose to 70% which was about 50.5% in 1970 and remained at about the same rate for a 20-year period. More than half of union members were women. In the same year in the USA this ratio was 20%. In the Soviet Union 72% of doctors were women. Even today this is a fascinating data.

Only 0.5% of high engineers and 3.5% of lawyers in the United States were women but in the Soviet Union more than 30% of high engineers and 35.4% of lawyers were women.⁶⁵ The principle of equal pay for equal work was implemented, and the difference between the average wages of men and women was due to their work in different sectors. On 8 March, and in various areas of the women's salvation struggle, the demand for "work for every woman who wants to work", which is impossible to meet in the capitalist society, was found to be a full job security for women under the roof of the Soviet Union. In the 1970 election, 463, or 31% of the members elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR were women. In the 1969-1971 period, only 2% of the 91st US Congress was made up of women members.⁶⁶ Many more comparisons can be made with examples. In short, despite the Thermidor, the Soviet Union had become a country with women athletes who have won worldwide successes in various sports, the first woman to go to space, and women who work in many professions with a rate above the world average for their period.

⁶⁵ St. George, p. 62.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Conclusion

The relationship between the October revolution and the salvation of women is a topic that deserves a much more detailed examination because of its specificities of different forms of oppression of women. As we mentioned earlier in this article, we tried to evaluate the working class program in terms of the emancipation of women in the light of the Soviet experience by considering the steps taken by the October Revolution towards the salvation of women. As we conclude, we are making the following determinations about the topics we discussed above, some of which are more detailed and some of which are more concise.

First, **oppression of woman and ending male domination were the priority topics of October Revolution.** After the revolution the young worker party, despite all the difficulties, tried to end male domination and made adjustments in order to end the oppression of woman and when the government had to make concessions to the old ruling and the male dominance, they expressed this with open heartedness.

Second, in the early years of October Revolution women's right were rapidly expanding and a new society was trying to be built, however this progress was not permanent because of the bureaucracy. On the basis of a contradiction between the interests of the working class and the salvation of women, the rights of women have not been sacrificed for the working class and for socialism. There is no contradiction between these two. The program, in which women's rights are sacrificed, is the "single-country socialism" program of the Thermidor bureaucracy. Trotsky explains the permanent revolution on three levels: continuity between the democratic revolution and socialist rebuilding of the society, continuity of the socialist revolution and continuity of the revolution worldwide in line with the international character of the socialist revolution. Since the Soviet Union did not maintain the continuity of the socialist revolution with Thermidor, there have been many field that goes backwards, and the breakthroughs that can lead to the salvation of the women follows the same backwards trend. The revolution had not been sustained around the world because the continuity of socialist revolution contradict with the interest of the Thermidor bureaucracy, therefore the bureaucracy applied "socialism in one country" program which aligned with their interest. Therefore it is necessary to emphasize that the October Revolution did not give some rights to women in order to attract women on their side and the October Revolution did not betray to women. The truth is bureaucracy betrayed to the October Revolution and to women. The inability to prevent the bureaucracy from being taken down by a political revolution had inevitably concluded with a regressive situation for women as well as for other areas.

Third, it is possible to say that **even under the rule of a bureaucratically corrupt workers' state, women are in a much better position than the advanced capitalist countries.** The removal(?) of private property, collectivization of women's

workload even though it is not fully satisfactory, unconditional job security, special studies in health and education fields in order to answer the needs of woman and other various practices indicate woman are in much better position in workers' state compared to advanced capitalist countries.

Fourth, mostly expressed on Lenin's speeches, and based on the necessity of participating in "labor" and "getting rid of the burden of domestic work" for the salvation of women, there is a criticism to the Bolsheviks and to Lenin and to October Revolution that they could not see the specific problems of women and that they reduced the women problem to an economic relationship and this criticism is not true. Lenin says that if all women cannot get out of the home, into the field of social production, women will be imprisoned in the house, and the salvation of women will not be possible. In Lenin's perspective, the road to women's salvation is more complex than the given reasons. The October Revolution had proved itself, by struggling against prostitution, abortion, violence to women and also by its struggle against social prejudice that insults women and its attempt to include women to politics. **These reasons prove that the October Revolution understands the specific problems that women experience and therefore the October Revolution forms a program accordingly.**

The October Revolution opened the door to a life that no other capitalist country can provide for women. Women did not only enter this door with great enthusiasm, they also recognized and understood their common interest with the working class and joined the struggle of building a new socialist society for their own salvation. If women cannot be free on Soviet territory, this is why the bureaucratic counter-revolution had opened the way for class-based collecting, rebuilding of capitalism, not only in terms of production relations but also in other social relations, as a whole, in the form of exploitation and oppression. This process, rebuilding of capitalism, lasted for decades but in the end it resulted with the return of capitalism just as Trotsky foresaw. Revolutionary Marxism, from the very first moment, preserves the legacy of the October Revolution and carefully studies the Soviet experience including the ideas of bureaucratic counter-revolutionaries, therefore today Revolutionary Marxism is the carrier of the program that will lead both workers and women to salvation.