

Women in Russia: It's complicated

By Michelle Carter

I poked my hand into the cubbyhole high above my head that served as my mailbox in the Moscow headquarters of the Russian American Press and Information Center and grasped something . . . wet.

I pulled out a small super-fragrant nosegay of tiny white flowers, so fresh they were still damp. I'd always been a patsy for fresh flowers but, in the last few weeks, I had been aching for my California garden where I knew azaleas, camellias and calla lilies were in full bloom. Then out of the frozen slush of a March Moscow morning came these mysterious white flowers.

“Ah, so you've found our little *pod snezhniki*,” one of my Russian officemates said as he walked into the room. “They grow in the forest near my *dacha*. When they poke up through the snow, they are the first announcement of spring although, of course, it doesn't look like spring will ever come this morning. In fact, that's where they get their name: *pod* — under, and *snezh* — snow. They come from under the snow and offer us hope.”

Later, I saw *babushki* (grandmothers) all over the city selling these little bouquets (which I later learned were called Snowdrops in America) in honor of International Women's Day. They smelled like jasmine, and I held them under my nose all the way upstairs to my office.

Until that day, I'd never heard of International Women's Day, and I found it more than a little ironic that this culture would put so much store by a single, official holiday for women, on one hand, and treat women so shabbily every other day of the year.

Russian society was built on the backs of women who labored, day in and day out. As little girls, they were carefully taught to serve their brothers and fathers while learning to flirt and tease to attract a spoiled man/boy whom they would marry while still in their teens. Then, as their husbands indulged themselves in vodka, cigarets, and night-long, kitchen-table bouts of deep, philosophical ramblings, they would rear their own daughters to serve and flirt or their sons to expect servitude and flirtation as little princes of Russia.

Women would work full-time, commute an hour or more by bus and Metro, morning and evening, shop on the way home, prepare meals, clean, supervise homework, and fall into an exhausted stupor only to get up the next morning and do it all over again. Women in Russia were old by 40 and ancient by 50. Of course, men in Russia were dead by 60 and, finally, the women would get some peace.

You know I'm generalizing here, but I've seen the pattern over and over in all the years I've been traveling in Russia. On the Metro, I study the bone-weary faces of women who, I now know, are 10 years younger than I am! They rub swollen, mishapen feet if they can find a seat. I've seen those feet in mid-journey on women in their twenties and thirties who clatter around on

the cobblestone and concrete of Moscow in three-inch heels carrying overstuffed shopping bags — until one day when they are too worn out and too old to care.

I once asked a co-worker why she didn't wear more comfortable shoes for walking. She sighed and smiled indulgently. "When I stop wearing these, I will be old. As long as I can walk in them, I will be young."

Perhaps the Great Patriotic War (as World War II is known in Russia) spawned this lifelong need to be sexy and flirtatious. The Soviet Union lost more than 26 million people, most of them men of marrying age — an entire generation of men — so maybe it's understandable that women felt the need to compete for the few men left.

Maybe it was a way to subvert the mechanical, emotionless, overly structured society of the Soviet period. Maybe it was a way to exercise power!

I have no answer, but I do know very little has changed for women over the 30 years I've been involved in the former Soviet Union. The Moscow Times, Russia's English-language newspaper, is currently doing a series on women in Russia today by interviewing three generations of women in five different families. They tell their stories in first-person, and they are riveting. A pediatrician of 60 tells of prepping for emergency surgery on a child with sepsis, only to have the female surgical nurses physically block her way into the operating room until the male surgeon they had summoned arrived — unfortunately too late to save the child.

Many recount stories of sexual harassment and assault. Putin's Russia recently decriminalized domestic abuse against women, underscoring the man's right to total authority in his own home and over his wife.

But that's not the whole story.

Years ago, some other heroines of International Women's Day lined up across the square from the busy Arbatskaya Metro station. The crowds rushing to work couldn't miss them, their shouts, or the signs they carried. The words varied from woman to woman, but the messages were the same:

Where is my son?

These are the Mothers of the Soldiers of Russia, and they have been standing vigil in the streets of Moscow daily since the invasion of the southern autonomous region of Chechnya began, sometimes silently with the portraits of their sons held in front of them, sometimes chanting as they try to make the generals meeting inside buildings nearby aware of their presence.

The group had grown spontaneously as mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and aunts encountered each other as they tried to get information about the Russian Army units that had been sent into Chechnya in an all-out assault against other Russian sons, these with mothers in the separatist Islamic region in the south.

The first place they turned to was the tiny and frigid basement office of the Mothers of the Soldiers of Russia, who organized themselves in 1989 to secure some rights for the young draftees who were often the victims of *dyeDOVschina* (institutionalized hazing). A month earlier the committee had shape-shifted into the opposition to the Chechen war, and the walls of the office had been plastered with bits of paper.

“Andrey Potronov of Company 2232 was taken prisoner near the village of Betshik. Not wounded.”

“Has anyone heard news of Sasha Davidov (photo attached)?”

Families turned to the Mothers of the Soldiers of Russia because they couldn't get any information about their sons from the Russian Ministry of Defense. The traditional telegram announcing the death of a soldier in battle had been lost — among a dozen other civilities — in this nasty war.

Other mothers had climbed on buses or trains and made their way to Chechnya to try to find their sons and bring them home. Some had succeeded, and their stories encouraged others to do the same. When they returned, they brought the names of the soldiers they had met or heard about to the basement office. The mothers were demanding to be noticed. They were a visible representation of the discomfort most Muscovites felt about this war of Russians against Russians. But the mothers would be satisfied with just the answer to their question: Where is my son?

It's equally hard for Russians to understand women who live by another code. Every time I got my haircut in Moscow, the *master* (stylist) would try to convince me to cover up the white that was rapidly overtaking the blond in my hair. "You would look so young!" (Ouch!)

Their pleas to henna my hair to an auburn red raised my consciousness about women with graying hair. Once I started looking, days would go by without seeing such a woman. Even the crones who swept the churchyards with twig brooms had coal black or red hair. That revelation caused me to add gray hair to the list of traits that tend to mark Americans in Russia — along with good teeth, big grins, and booming voices.

Another issue that roiled Russia over the past summer — and even brought the elderly into the streets in protest — was Putin's effort to raise the pension age from 55 to 63 for women and 65 for men. That pension was no great sum but it was a significant carry-over from the Soviet period which provided cradle-to-grave economic security. For women (who outlive men by more than 10 years), it meant some income to shelter them in their widowhood.

The bill was signed into law, and now those *babushki* (grandmothers) who once could look forward to some rest after a lifetime of labor know that they will have to labor on — well into their old age.