

Women, Society and the Media in North-Eastern Siberia (Russia)

LUDMILA LEVINA

The Northern Review #22 (Winter 2000): 68-69.

Human existence in extreme natural conditions has always been problematic. In different times and by different governments and organizations, projects aimed at the investigation and solution of the “problems” facing northern civilization and development have been introduced. Each time such work was conducted, the progress of mankind has been limited in accordance with those well-known facts to have already been articulated. Not only have northern populations been and still are being challenged with severe natural conditions and their effects on the human environment, but so too are northerners challenged with a number of negative social aspects. In the Russian North, human life is uncomfortable and is not protected to any great extent by social institutions. Nevertheless, life in the North continues.

A large part of the credit for this persistence belongs to northern women who, despite all the difficulties of northern existence, must deal with responsibilities such as bearing children, educating them in extremely difficult conditions, and maintaining the role of the hearth’s keeper within the home—both a mother and a woman. For thousands of years, women of the Russian Far North did not have much opportunity to express their opinions or to raise their voices to defend themselves, their families and children. Northern women were

equal to men in one sense: they divided all the difficulties associated with survival in the North. Leading a nomadic and uncomfortable life, women have traditionally worked alongside men to subsist. Even until the present time, northern women fulfilled roles as reindeer herders, fishers, hunters, and cattle breeders.

The recent political and economic changes occurring in Russia have certainly influenced the fates of northern women. Their public presence and community activism has grown, giving rise to many public organizations. These include various associations comprised of businesswomen, teachers, doctors, members of the artistic and scientific communities (the intelligentsia), and rural/agricultural women. We must take into consideration the fact that the majority of the population of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) are women. However, women have generally not been able to formulate the issues that they share in common. Were this achieved, it may be possible to not only unite women's efforts, but also to make other achievements that could benefit northern women such as becoming the voice that speaks on behalf of public women's organizations; accumulating new ideas for solving the most important problems related to family and motherhood; and becoming equal partners in business and allies in conducting economic and social reforms in the region.

The first and only fortunate example of such an initiative to date is the women's newspaper *Ona Plus*, which was established early in 1999. It reaches a wide audience, with a weekly circulation of ten thousand copies. The main functions of the newspaper have been to promote issues and activity concerning women's lives and challenges, including women's consolidation, the struggles of modern everyday life, achieving a healthy way of life, and support for ethnic communities. Apart from this work, the editing staff has conducted a number of charitable actions vis-à-vis poor people, invalids, mothers of large families, etc. It is exactly for this purpose that our newspaper expends

money received from various lotteries, reader's quizzes, and festivals. The newspaper is distributed throughout the entire territory of Sakha Republic (Yakutia) and has its own web site available via the Internet. From the very first day of operation, the newspaper has existed by funding provided by several firms within the Republic, the personal financing of the publisher, and the revenue generated through advertising. The newspaper receives no financial support from the government.

We are very interested in cooperating with international women's organizations and in experiencing exchanges on common issues, especially as they concern other northern regions of the world. We hope that our participation in the Circumpolar Women's Conference "Different Lives, Common Threads" will assist us in doing this.

Ludmila Levina is the Chief Editor of the newspaper *Ona Plus (Women Plus)* in Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, Russia.