

**Global Feminisms  
Comparative Case Studies of  
Women's Activism and Scholarship**

**RUSSIA**

**Mariia Grigor'evna Kotovskaia**

**Interviewed by Natalia Pushkareva**

**Moscow, Russia**

**June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

**University of Michigan  
Institute for Research on Women and Gender  
1136 Lane Hall Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1290  
Tel: (734) 764-9537**

**E-mail: [um.gfp@umich.edu](mailto:um.gfp@umich.edu)**

**Website: <http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem>**

© Regents of the University of Michigan, 2015

**Mariia Grigor'evna Kotovskaia**, born in 1952, is an ethnographer and anthropologist. In 1975, she graduated from Moscow State University and in 1979 she finished graduate school at the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences as a specialist on issues of peoples of America. She began research on women and gender in the 1990s after founding the Group for Ethno-Gender Research at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (IAE RAS). At the present time, she is a professor at the Russian State University for the Humanities and the Russian State University for Design and Technology, a Leading Research Fellow at the Ethno-gender Research Division IEA RAS, Vice-President of the regional public organization Association of Women Leaders, a member of the Public Council at the Central Federal District, a member of the Academic Council entitled "Development Strategies for Institutions of Civil Society in Moscow," Vice-Chairperson on the Commission on Ethnicities and Immigration Policy in the Moscow Municipal Advisory Board, a member for the Commission for Family, Children and Youth, Chairperson of the Committee on Ethnicities and Immigrant Policy of Public Communications in the Moscow Municipal Government, a Russian Federation President's Expert on Social Grants, and a member of the Public Council of the Moscow Municipal Government.

She is the author of many books and the editor of collections on gender ethnology issues, including *Be Envious – I am a Woman* (Moscow: Larini Servis, 1993); *Essay on Gender History: Events, Facts, Modern Times* (Moscow: IEA RAS, 2004); *Gender, Culture, Religion (Tradition and Modern Times* (Moscow: Severo-print, 2006); *Contemporary Aspects of Upbringing and Education* (Moscow: MSUDT, 2006); *Family in the 21st Century: The Role of the State, Gender, and the Upbringing of Children* (Moscow: MSUDT, 2007).

**Natal'ia L'vovna Pushkareva** was born on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1959 in Moscow, Russia. She is currently a Professor, Chief Research Fellow, and the Head of the Womens and Gender Studies Department at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her fields of interest include gender history, history of family relations, the social anthropology of the academic community, as well as the history of sexuality in medieval, modern, and contemporary Russia. The chief editor of the yearbook *Sotsial'naia istoriia (Social History)*, she also serves as president of the Russian Association for Research in Women's History. From 1981 to 2016, she has edited more than thirty essay collections, published dozens of articles for both academic and non-academic magazines, and written dictionary and encyclopedia entries as well as monographs. Pushkareva is considered to be a principal founder of the field of women's studies in Russia.

**The Global Feminisms Project** is a collaborative international oral history project that examines feminist activism, women's movements, and academic women's studies in sites around the world. Housed at the University of Michigan, the project was started in 2002 with a grant from the Rackham Graduate School. The virtual archive includes interviews from women activists and scholars from Brazil, China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States.

Our collaborator in Russia is Dr. Natalia L. Pushkareva, who gathered a diverse group of feminist scholar-activists and colleagues for the Russia portion of the Global Feminisms

Project and conducted the majority of the interviews. Our work in Russia was supported by a Collaborative Planning Grant from University of Michigan's Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

**Natal'ia Pushkareva: Mariia Grigor'evna Kotovskaia, senior research fellow at the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, professor at the Russian State University for the Humanities. Mariia Grigor'evna, good day, please tell me briefly about yourself, about your life. Where do you place yourself right now? What has been done? What remains to be done in the sense of your research and your work in the women's movement?**

Mariia Kotovskaia: Good afternoon. Well, what can I say about my life... First, I would like to mention that in my family I was not raised as a boy or a girl, but as a person whose life would be interesting and creative.

I think that's most important. So I mean that no one ever told me: "you're a girl, that means you'll get married and have a baby." None of that. Of course, as in every family, they talked about it. They all wanted me to have a fulfilling personal life and to have children. However, what was emphasized in my upbringing was a good education and the cultivation of creative aptitudes, and this kind of sense of equality with any man or boy; this was probably instilled in me by my upbringing because it was the basis of my parent's relationship with one another and their view of the world. So when I matriculated<sup>1</sup>... I was finishing mathematical school, and I was very... this was during a time of educational experimentation: I studied at a mathematical school, the curriculum of which included an in-depth study of English. But because... well, actually the school was close to home, so I went to it more because I was too lazy to go to a school that was slightly further away. Anyway, I graduated from that school with a gold medal for academic excellence. I initially wanted to study astronomy because half of our class for some reason wanted to look at the stars. However, my parents played a role in my choice; they thought the humanities were right for me despite this interest in the stars. And so I went to the university to attend a presentation by leading scholars, and I liked the History Department best.

There was probably something romantic about my decision. Our generation was and still is a generation of romantics. We all wanted to travel, to follow "the scent of taiga."<sup>2</sup> And when I heard from the Ethnology Department (then it was called ethnography) that there would be expeditions, that it was very interesting – I was so excited, and I decided to enroll in the History Department. Naturally, when I finished in the History Department... well, after my sophomore year I picked ethnography as my subfield. Because I was obsessed; I wanted to travel, and I actually started traveling right after my second year. And I've never regretted my choice of field because ethnology is the study of humans within their culture and its characteristics. It always fascinated me. Studying humans within their culture inevitably leads to the question: why are gender relations as they are? Probably because ethnology especially encourages in-depth study of the relations between men and women. This was perfectly natural because female ethnologists were

---

<sup>1</sup> To enroll as a member of a body, specifically in a college or university. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/matriculate> Accessed January 12, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to the 1964 song by the Leningrad singer-songwriter Iurii Kukin. The song became something of "an unofficial hymn for geologists and tourists" because it expresses a romantic interest in travel and the discovery of the unknown. See "За туманом," in *Википедия*, October 21, 2018, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%97%D0%B0\\_%D1%82%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BC&oldid=95719989](https://ru.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%97%D0%B0_%D1%82%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BC&oldid=95719989).

the first ones to talk about the specifics of culture, especially in traditional culture – masculine and feminine culture – that male ethnologists could not get for a very long time. Precisely because there are specifics of rituals, nuances. My expeditions—when I was an undergraduate and then a graduate student—to Central Asia and Siberia have shown me that these nuances exist. And, on that basis, you begin to think about why this hierarchy emerged and what leads to it.

At the time when the women's movement started in Russia – and it started in the 1990's on the wave of liberalism... liberalism... And I have always said that the liberal movement, liberal political structure, is inextricably linked with the development of women's movement and the development of gender studies. Svetlana Aivazova<sup>3</sup> then invited me to her Femina Club<sup>4</sup>. It was one of the first...

**NP: What year was this in?**

MK: Natal'ia, I'm not sure, but it was sometime in the... I can't say...

**NP: The beginning of the 1990s?**

MK: Yes, the beginning of the 1990s. It just started then. I was invited to this club Femina as an ethnologist. And, all of a sudden, we had so much fun, such discussions! The women's movement – how it was, how it started... For most women researchers (because they were the first to come into this movement) it was also a path to self-discovery.

I remember because there was this very serious and at the same time very funny incident. I had two children at the time, and I was very tired one evening, and I was watching a TV program about women's lives. I remember sitting and sobbing; I felt so sorry for women, and all of it also applied to me... So the women's movement in Russia in the 1990s emerged out of this common understanding that changes, solidarity and coordination of our actions were necessary. And I remember this as one of the most vivid events in my life because it helped me not only to understand myself, but also understand the place of an individual in society and in this structure. And my friendship with these women started then... Now the women with whom we started in the nineties (and we all know each other, there's no one new there), are still very close and made closer by our understanding of the broad goals that we had at that time.

Regarding my goals now... I would like to... I wrote a book *Gender Issues in Contemporary Russia*, but everything in it was before the 2000s. Now I would like to collect as much material as possible that has to do with everyday life. Because after we are gone, this

---

<sup>3</sup> Svetlana Grigor'evna Aivazova is a Soviet and Russian historian and political scientist who specializes in gender studies, and is known as one of the creators of "gender political science" in Russia. She is a member of the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, member of the Coordinating Council on Gender Issues under the Ministry of Health and Social Development of the Russian Federation, member of the Scientific Council of the Russian Association of Political Sciences, and head of the Gender Political Science Research Committee. See <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Айвазова,СветланаГригорьевна> Accessed January 18, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The Femina Club began in 1990 in the town of Naberezhnye as an informal gathering of women's rights activists, headed by Elena Mashkova. In 1994, It gained official status as an independent nonprofit organization. See <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Айвазова,СветланаГригорьевна> Accessed January 31, 2020.

material will remain as something of an archive. My goal now is to start up doing this again next year. To collect a huge amount of material related to everyday practices, life, relationships in different areas. This is in regard to academic activity...

In terms of my public life... I am a member of the Moscow Municipal Advisory Board<sup>5</sup> for seven years now, and a chair of the Commission on Inter-ethnic Relations, Migration, and Religions. A very complex commission and very challenging in these times. It's interesting because now I want to survey women... prominent women in these minority, diaspora communities of Moscow most of all... I think it makes sense because they show more clearly the strong trends which are happening in various diasporas. It would be good to survey several such diaspora leaders in Moscow, to record their thoughts and publish them because it's very important material.

**NP: You mean male leaders or female leaders? And how is this research connected with the women's movement?**

MK: About the women's movement in a moment. I want to survey female leaders of diasporas, as well as men, to see how they view the problems encountered by members of their diaspora communities. Because there are so many problems, and our commission now has the very practical goal of creating a safe haven for migrant women who rarely come with their husbands and wind up in poverty. This contains the problem of violence as well... So that they would know where they could go for tangible help, where they can get support, above all. So many of these problems are connected—we will be working on them—health care for migrant women. It's one thing when a woman is here by herself; that usually means she's here legally and has her documents. However, when she comes here with her husband, she doesn't always have a legal immigration status; there are also a lot of problems here, which we have to solve. And in terms of child education? This is another issue that we are bringing to legislators, so we definitely have practical problems to work on.

As far as the practical is concerned, Natal'ia, I think that our goal... and also the misfortune of the contemporary women's movement is that today's youth are not interested in joining the women's movement. And this passing of the baton and this deep understanding that we need to fight for equal rights, identify ourselves as free people, it's completely lost on the young generation. When I speak about this—we have a lot of female students—they get enthusiastic, but they do things on a smaller scale: "Let's do this campaign! Let's do this campaign!" But they don't understand that these little campaigns, if there's not a general women's movement undergirding them, will not last. And I think it has to do with our generally more conservative atmosphere in today's society. Because—I am going to say it again—feminism and the women's movement are inextricably linked with liberalism and with democratization in general. At the same time, I think, our task is to—so long as we are still alive and well, more or less—to nurture and to leave something behind... Because if we do not do this within the next decade, there

---

<sup>5</sup> The Moscow Municipal Advisory Board, also termed the Moscow Public Chamber or Civic Chamber, is not an official body, but is made up of volunteers. It consults with the city of Moscow to promote and protect civic initiatives and institutions. See [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Общественная\\_палата\\_города\\_Москвы](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Общественная_палата_города_Москвы) Accessed January 30, 2020.

will just be a pit with no foundation. And those who come after us would have to start over again.

**NP: Could you talk about what was done in the nineties, about impressive campaigns, events, or projects?**

MK: Well... There were so many that it's hard to say. We all...

**NP: Chronologically what's the first thing that comes to mind and when...?**

MK: Dubna. One of our moves was Dubna. Remember, Natal'ia, we were all in Dubna. Dubna was probably a very large-scale, very memorable manifesto for all of us.<sup>6</sup> And we all were inspired by it for a long time... Second, Svetlana Aivazova brought me into the political arena because we were very close. I was the assistant to Efim Iosifovich Pivovarov<sup>7</sup> who was the Deputy of the Women of Russia faction and was my leader. He was the leading figure and we reported to him. I was under him, he led us. But it was interesting. Very interesting. And I very much valued our work, unlike many women, who believe... who harshly criticized—justifiably—that work because the faction in some regards did not accomplish its mission, but all the same we made a huge breakthrough in that we were a women's party in a system of only male parties, and I was very interested in working with these women.

I still meet with some of them. For example, I meet with Galina Ivanovna Klimantova<sup>8</sup>, who now heads the National Committee *Russian Family*. I'm her vice president, I take part in its presidium, I am the president of its Moscow branch. So that's something we are trying to do now, something we are trying to revive. It's very complicated. Another example: I still have a very good relationship with Lakhova, considering the complexity of the situation...<sup>9</sup> She is a very prominent person even with all her complexities. That's the best way of putting it. Others may think of her differently, but it also needs to be

---

<sup>6</sup> MK is here referencing the First Independent Women's Forum Meeting which took place in Dubna, a city not far outside Moscow. Starting around 1991/1992, women met at the Independent Women's Forum to network with other women and organizations. (Information Center of Independent Women's Forum, Moscow. Accessed December 05, 2017. <http://www.owl.ru/eng/women/aiwo/iciwf.htm>.)

<sup>7</sup> Efim Iosifovich Pivovarov is a professor at the Moscow State Historical-Archival Institute who specializes in Soviet History. He is also a Doctor of Historical Sciences. See Viola, Lynne. "A Researcher's Guide to Sources on Soviet Social History in the 1930s".

<sup>8</sup> Galina Ivanovna Klimantova is a national leader who served as director of the Udmurtia Children's Affairs Department in the 1980s. She also served as the Duma deputy and chair of the Committee on Women, Family, and Youth Affairs between 1994-1995. Currently she serves as a staff member of the Federation Council since 1996. See Noonan, Norma. "Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements."

<sup>9</sup> Ekaterina Fedulovna Lakhova is the chair of the Women's Union of Russia, member of the Federation Council Committee for the Federal System, Regional Policy, Local Governance and Affairs of the North, and senator from the Bryansk Region. (Interview by Vladimir Nesterov. Exclusively for Vestnik Kavkaza. "Ekaterina Lakhova" Vestnik Kavkaza. Accessed February 16, 2018. <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/interviews/Ekaterina-Lakhova-%E2%80%9CA-woman-is-designed-so-that-she-can-save-family-peace-Russia%E2%80%9D.html>.)

recognized that she is still trying to support the women's movement which is collapsing and falling apart.<sup>10</sup> That's my view, but there are many views on this issue<sup>11</sup>.

Participation in political movements has given me a great deal of understanding of political structure and the process of decision-making. Sometimes, when I attend women's gatherings now, I notice this particular weakness. Because when you make a proposition, you need to understand what structures you are going to use to promote it and how you are going to prepare it for hearings. Because in the State Duma<sup>12</sup> propositions go through several phases and at every phase a decision must be made. So that's very important... Very important. And my participation in that faction gave me all of it. I understand factional opposition...

**NP: Would it be possible to say that the Russian women's movement in the 1990s was closely linked and even dependent on Western financial support?<sup>13</sup> And what is the extent of the independence of the Russian women's movement? Or could it be said that it only continued developing as long as it was financed?**

MK: I wouldn't say that. It is now very often said that the entire women's movement grew with Western financial support. But I remember... Let's return to the Femina Club, for example... Yes, they received a grant. I don't remember, I don't want to say exactly from whom. But yes, there was a Western grant... But the women who participated in the event weren't just rolling in money. There were some grants, which were used for some general events; presentations were made, all of it was offered absolutely free. They didn't do this because they thought they would make money doing it. I went because it was extraordinarily interesting. Because most of the women of our generation were pursuing their passions.

**NP: So asking Western foundations didn't hurt, but rather helped...?**

MK: I believe it helped. I believe it helped. Firstly, I should say that I learned a lot then when I met with international scholars: from Europe, the USA. I was interested. Because what they did was new to us. Those who came and became involved with gender issues, women's issues, they knew about these issues from books and publications. And when you see those who studied it in real life, it's like teaching students when you work with them in person... Directly, not remotely. These are different things, it's a different quality.

---

<sup>10</sup> Despite the increased number of women involved in Russian politics after the 1990's, women still face many forms of social and political discrimination. In Putin's Russia, although the government promotes more opportunities for women's involvement in politics, the administration still perpetuates a patriarchal and misogynistic culture. (Johnson, Janet Elise. "Fast-Tracked or Boxed In? Informal Politics, Gender, and Women's Representation in Putin's Russia." *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 03 (2016): 643-59. doi:10.1017/s1537592716001109.)

<sup>11</sup> Translation Note: This sentence was added in by the translator because it occurs in the recorded interview, but it is not in the original Russian transcript.

<sup>12</sup> The State Duma is the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia. The headquarters are located in Moscow. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State\\_Duma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_Duma) Accessed January 12, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Western countries provided funds to Russia after 1992 in an attempt to promote democratic and free-market institutions. (Menges, Constantine C. "An Initial Assessment of U.S. Aid to Russia, 1992-1995 And a Strategy for More Effective Assistance." [https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/04-04\\_menges.pdf](https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/04-04_menges.pdf).)

For that reason, the work of foundations in attracting good specialists to Russia for this work and in building bridges – I think it was very important and I believe it was positive.

As far as I'm concerned, I've never experienced... I wasn't dining on Western grant money, as they now say. We received... Honestly, I received a few grants from Soros, from MacArthur, but we used them for research, writing articles and books; that was all. I don't see anything bad in that.

**NP: You never used them for political purposes?**

MK: Oh God no! We never tried to push anyone to participate in any political activity. It never happened, I can honestly say. In terms of trying to convince me into a political position even once, no. No. I think that, Natal'ia, nothing of the sort never happened for you either! We are very independent people and each of us knows their place and understands how she is going to go about her life, what to pursue in this world. That's why it's very hard to influence any of us.

**NP: And here a question arises: when—can you say about the past—when we heard the word "feminism," what was understood by it? What does it mean now and is it possible to freely say about yourself in today's Russia, "I am a feminist"?**

MK: I'll start at the end. You know that I always say I'm a feminist. And I have never concealed it and never will. And I say it openly because it's my point of view. I believe that feminism (in terms of how I accept it) is simply an open recognition of the equality of women in all areas. And the struggle for this equality. For example, there has been a proposal to charge money for abortions. As a feminist, I don't support this position because it's unacceptable (of course, it doesn't mean that I support abortions). First, I think we have to say here that abortions show, on the one hand, a lack of responsibility. But, on the other hand, they show that a critical piece of the puzzle has been lost: namely, competent sex education for high school students and first year female college students. Everyone shares responsibility for this because we were unable to defend and advance the gains we had made. That's the first thing. And the second thing I can't accept—because this violates my freedom of choice—I believe that a woman, as a human being and an individual, is entitled to be in charge of her life. And choose her path. And freedom of choice in feminism is the most important issue. Standing up for freedom of a human being, an individual; that's why I've always said that I am a feminist. That's the first thing.

For me... I remember when we were just starting, we were all together... And Voronina<sup>14</sup> was there and Aivazova. Natal'ia, I think you were there... I don't remember where we were, I think at Aivazova's. At that time there was the Institute of the Labor Movement, and we were writing our favorite word on the blackboard... We were thinking how gender studies would be referred to here: because when the word "gender" was translated into

---

<sup>14</sup> Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Voronina is a Russian philosopher and educator with prominent research in feminist and gender issues in Russia. She focuses on women's issues in mass media, such as sexism in advertising, sexist language, and erotic publications. She became the director of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies (MCGS) in 1995. See Noonan, Norma. "Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements." Accessed January 30, 2020.

Russian, it didn't sound good. But we couldn't come up with anything else, and "gender" remained "gender."

I remember when Valerii Aleksandrovich Tishkov<sup>15</sup> created the first gender division... Or it was a laboratory, I don't remember what it was called then... I remember that everyone initially was very skeptical toward the idea, and the first meetings of academic councils... I remember... I will never forget when I went there to introduce this subject (Valerii Aleksandrovich asked me)... And I heard, "Here's one of the 'sexers.' The 'sexers'<sup>16</sup> are coming." Because "gender" was viewed as "biological sex." There's no such problem now, it's an established term, but then it was so...

Feminism was perceived in various ways, and it's interpreted in various ways now. Sometimes it was linked with sexual orientation, but I believe that at that time there was less of a negative overtone to the term "feminism" than now. Because it's not a secret that many feminists are now afraid to admit that they are involved in gender studies, that they are feminists, because feminism has become a slur. Because there has been such a turn to the right. And now I am sometimes surprised when some of our female friends, who were feminists or were in the feminist movement when it was fashionable, have now become very reactionary, reactionary in their support of some fundamentalist politics, either of the state or the church. And they deny many things that seemed obvious to me.

**NP: What is the reason for this change? What is it connected with? With the changing political climate? When did it start?**

MK: I think it's linked with the political climate and with the rise of fundamentalism in the religious sphere. Not only in Russian Orthodoxy<sup>17</sup>, but also in the religious sphere overall. This fundamentalism is promoting traditional family values; and it always seemed to me that... egalitarian<sup>18</sup> thought and ideals were always our achievement. We can't live in a society built on ideals of economic and social equality when there is gender inequality. We just can't. The very structure of family relationships leads to internal equality. And this turn back now is very... I just recently spoke at a conference where I heard again a call to return to traditional family values... I always ask, what is implied by traditional family values? I can't understand it.

**NP: Is your own research linked with these contemporary issues in today's women's movement? To what extent?**

---

<sup>15</sup> Valerii Aleksandrovich Tishkov has been the Director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences since 2000. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valery\\_Tishkov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valery_Tishkov) Accessed January 30, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Translators note: Here MK says she and others were referred to as *polovichki*, derived from the word *pol*, meaning "biological sex." The neologism is meant to be derogatory, although it is somewhat childish, because it sounds like other words formed from *pol* such as *polovye infektsii* (STIs). "Sexers" is likely the best way to convey this phonological pun.

<sup>17</sup> The Russian Orthodox Church is an Eastern Orthodox Church with its own head bishop. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_Orthodox\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Orthodox_Church). Accessed January 12, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Referring to the political philosophy that all people are equal in fundamental worth and moral status. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egalitarianism> Accessed January 12, 2020.

MK: Yes, I was just planning to... I was just recently invited to this – and, Natal'ia, I want you to join too... The Institute for African Studies will have the most interesting theme: women's non-profits around the world. I'd like to talk about women's non-profits in Russia. And I think that we could do something together—I'll take one part, you take the other—about the women's movement in Russia. It would be so great because there are more problems than positive things. We'll say it like that.

**NP: How is contemporary women's movement in Russia connected to Western women's organizations? Do these ties exist? I'm asking because in Soviet times the Committee of Soviet Women<sup>19</sup> positioned itself as part of the international women's movement. It regularly sent delegations to world congresses, etc. And then in the 90s the only clear manifestation of international cooperation between women's organizations in Russia and the West was Beijing and the meeting in Beijing.<sup>20</sup>**

MK: And that was it.

**NP: And afterwards we haven't seen any, many can't even name any women's organizations abroad, much less tell you what they are. So consequently, are we interested in staying in touch with the world women's movement? Or do we have our own path? What's our position?**

MK: First, I don't like this "our own path." Because I believe (although it's now an unpopular view) that Russia is heading in the direction of this Western-style, European development. We have a common path. Regarding whether I know of any women's movements... I think that now all these contacts with women's organizations are in the hands of government structures. Let's put it this way: it's impossible to know what's happening in the West unless you go abroad. We have no ties with Western women's organizations. I think that's very bad. I believe that the women's movement in Russia must go hand in hand with the women's movement in the West. It's another matter that we have the right to choose the most appropriate directions for our women's movement. That's that right to choose that's always there. That's the first thing. The second thing, I think, is what we need to talk about. This disconnect is not a good thing. It's a breakup of all ties, a breakup of the common movement, direction, and it has a negative effect on the women's movement. That's what I think. Yes.

**NP: Is there any hope that funding can be renewed and that any Western institutions or organizations can help us financially? Or should we be thinking about how to finance our own non-profits through Russian foundations?**

---

<sup>19</sup> A social organization of Soviet women founded in September 1941 with the intent of unifying women of the USSR and foreign countries in a common struggle for peace and security. See Prokhorov, Alexander. "Great Soviet Encyclopedia."

<sup>20</sup> The United Nations Fourth Annual World Conference, held in Beijing in 1995, aimed to highlight the obstacles that women face entering public and political spheres around the world while promoting justice, equality, and peace. The conference was a major opportunity for groups to promote women's empowerment and network building among organizations. ("Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995." United Nations. Accessed February 15, 2018. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/fwcwn.html>.)

MK: Getting Western funding is now very difficult. As we've seen, all public organizations must be registered if they receive any funding from the West. It's not a secret. I think that we should now be searching for our own resources.

**NP: From where? We are getting to the question of how to come up with funding. We know that in Russia, in the past specifically, women entrepreneurs contributed money for the development of numerous women's groups and organizations and created jobs for women. Today women entrepreneurs are not involved at all in the women's movement and probably think of it as hopeless.**

MK: Yes. First, that's right. I think they're not involved. And, in fact, I'll repeat myself again, they only deal with short-term issues, and they are mainly focused on philanthropy. And volunteering. It gets funded, they invest money in it...

**NP: But it's not us that chooses. It's not women's organizations that are choosing to whom to give money.**

MK: But women's organizations on their own have voluntarily abandoned this segment of social involvement. And I think it was their biggest mistake. By leaving the area of social involvement first, and then they left the political arena. These were two fatal mistakes. This is the reason why they have no choices and no effective voice. And in order to have choices again and receive funds, this area of public service needs to be reclaimed. Nothing will happen until this is done.

You might ask what's happening with the Women of Moscow movement?<sup>21</sup> It was one of the powerful and highly regarded movements. It just disintegrated because women can't find a leader. And this inability to cooperate and place common interests above personal interests is a huge disadvantage of the women's movement in Russia. Natal'ia, you yourself know that if we, in our research field (thank God, knock on wood, it still exists), started behaving as if everyone was for themselves, things would just collapse. Especially today, when attitudes toward gender research have shifted so much, and not for the better, honestly speaking. So what helps us survive is our solidarity and our focus. For some reason, it's not happening in the women's movement. I believe that if we could find a strong female leader now—it doesn't matter: it could be from A Just Russia or even United Russia!<sup>22</sup> But it has to be an individual to be reckoned with. And that's enough

**NP: And this individual can even be a conservative?**

---

<sup>21</sup> According to its website, the Forum of the Women of Moscow is a regional organization dedicated to the advancement of the women's movement. Founded on October 20, 2010, it unites various women's organizations in Moscow under one banner, with the goal of articulating and advocating policy proposals in regional and national government. See "Mysite | O Nas," Контакты | Москва | Форум женщин Москвы, accessed May 18, 2019, <https://www.woman-forum.com/o-nas>.

<sup>22</sup> A Just Russia, sometimes translated as A Fair Russia, is a prominent minority social-democratic party in contemporary Russia. Many consider it a tool of Russian power brokers because it does not offer a genuine alternative to the party of power. United Russia, which is Putin's party, is the current party of power.

MK: A conservative is not going to join the women's movement. It's a litmus<sup>23</sup> test. A woman who would be such a leader would already have ties with the women's movement. Because no conservative party—that is a woman who represents them—is going to get involved with the women's movement. Of course! Absolutely! But there is no such leader now and we need to find her. At least for the Women of Moscow movement. Because it was a powerful movement.

**NP: Is there any hope that in today's parties or movements the gender agenda would be viewed not from a neo-patriarchal position but rather from a liberal or a social-democratic standpoint ?<sup>24</sup> That is to say, those who were around during Soviet times and have the goal of defending the achievements of that era, which were...**

MK: For instance, I was so shocked by[names person]. Because I remember how she brought us together and we were... in the beginning of her work she brought together researchers. Svetlana Aivazova, Natal'ia, you were there, and I was there too... We remember it! And Voronina was there... And then there was a sudden change of direction. But it's well known that this proposal to charge for abortions was hers. And, strangely enough, it was rejected by Matvienko<sup>25</sup> who said, "it's a violation of everything... Both in legislative and in human terms." That is, the state turned out to be more feminist than representatives of the former women's movement. This is a vivid example of this recent backsliding. When it comes to the women's movement and parties – honestly speaking – I can't see it; perhaps, I just don't know. It's hard to say.

**NP: Maybe young people will...**

MK: Perhaps, young people will join. But so far, I haven't seen the women who would continue in this direction. Because, again, the policy of small-scale projects wins. Great, let's get together right now and help this orphanage. Help these children. But there is no common field of activity, and, most importantly, no plan or strategy for the women's movement. And if we want to revive what we call the women's movement, we must have a strategy.

---

<sup>23</sup> A litmus test is a test in which a single factor is decisive. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/litmus%20test> Accessed January 12, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> The Soviet state was not always very receptive to women's grassroots organizing. The Russian government claimed that the "women's problem" had been solved yet continued to reinforce patriarchal interpretations of women's role in society, such as women being the caretakers of the family. Although there was organizing by women in Russia to improve social conditions and gender equality, there was still a heavy traditionalist emphasis from the government. As noted by Elena Zdravomyslova in her article "Overview of the Feminist Movement in Contemporary Russia," Russian women's organizations and NGO's were abundant but had a hard time sustaining membership in the early 2000's (when she published her article; Zdravomyslova, Elena. "Overview of the Feminist Movement in Contemporary Russia." *Diogenes* 49, no. 194 (2002): 35-39. doi:10.1177/039219210204919406.)

<sup>25</sup> Valentina Matvienko is a prominent female politician in Russia. In addition to her work on the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, she has served as the Governor of St. Petersburg and Chairwoman of the Federation Council. ("Valentina Matviyenko." Wikipedia. February 13, 2018. Accessed February 16, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valentina\\_Matviyenko](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valentina_Matviyenko).)

**NP: And it has to be developed by ourselves! Because if we again look to the West and European countries, they have different... different problems.**

MK: They have completely different problems.

**NP: And because of that not all ideas, which have been tried and realized in the West, can be applied here without adjustments and without...**

MK: Absolutely! I think that now everyone who is in the women's movement, who is serious about it, already understands the intricacies of what must be done here. It doesn't mean that the core values are left behind. The core values are the freedom of the individual and the right to choose. But the work must be aligned with the problems and challenges we are facing right now. And I think that we have to be open-minded, just sit and have a civilized discussion. And, most likely, unfortunately, the older structures can't do it. That's something I've been thinking about. And I think that after the summer is over and we all get some rest, we'll need to gather the older feminist activists (we can talk about ourselves like that, "older feminist activists," what else can we call ourselves now?). There may be only few of us, but there were only few of us then, when we first started, too.

**NP: And just a little on this topic: can we build on the experience of creating, say, the Women of Moscow movement?**

MK: I think that we need...

**NP: On how it happened, on what... Who originated it? What was the impetus for it? So that we could at least be reminded of how things were – and, perhaps, we can have some success now.**

MK: Well, Natal'ia, if we're going to remember anything, it's that you were the impetus for the Women of Moscow movement. I was there too. And Nadezhda<sup>26</sup>...

**NP: Shvedova.**

MK: Shvedova. In one way or another, Voronina was a part of it.

**NP: Of course.**

MK: And, above all, the one who understood our women's objectives was Liudmila Ivanovna Shvetsova<sup>27</sup>, who, unfortunately, died far too early. A major leader and a woman who understood the importance of the women's movement. And although she was always in government, she understood the meaning and significance of the women's movement. And that's why it worked out. Now, I think, we need to meet. To talk again, to create a strategy and, possibly, to look at the new deputies, bright young women whom we could

---

<sup>26</sup> Nadezhda Alexandrovna Shvedova is the Chief Research Fellow at the Center for Socio-political Research in the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of the US and Canadian Studies. See <http://new.iskran.ru/en/structure/intra-political/center-for-social-and-political-studies/> Accessed January 30, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Liudmila Ivanovna Shvetsova was the Deputy Chairman of the State Duma from 2011 until 2014. See Noonan, Norma. "Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements." Accessed January 12, 2020.

mentor (I am not afraid of this word) – mentor them for work with women's organizations and to head this movement.

I don't believe that now... while the movement is stretched thin and while women who have never been associated with the women's movement – for example, [names person], it's just something absolutely ridiculous. This [organization] of hers, it's not a women's movement in any sense. And how do such women even aspire to lead the women's movement? I think it's an absolute dead-end. And the only thing I believe that we can do is that some time in September or October, after we get some rest and gather our strength, we can get together! May it be without any freeloaders. We need to get together as a close circle of researchers, of people who work in this field, who have had a specific academic path, and come up with—like we talked in those days about gender, what is gender—come up with even a very basic strategy, steps. And after the elections, to search for leaders, strong women, to

**NP: Support.**

MK: Support and cultivate.

And I believe that our most important task is to create a new women's faction in parliament. Because as long as we don't have any women in the legislative or executive branches nothing will happen. It's going to be just insignificant routine small talk. Nothing more. If we want to again rebuild, advance, and truly stand up for women's interests, we must go on and do the most important thing: to create either a powerful women's faction or factions in all government structures. There is no other way.

**NP: Mariia Grigor'evna, thank you so much for sharing your ideas, and see you next time.**