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## **Introduction to the Special Issue: The Status of Women in Russian Society: Kennan Institute Live Virtual Conference, 21-23 July 2020**

By Olimpiada Usanova<sup>1</sup>

The Kennan Institute Live Virtual Conference took place online for the first time in 2020. On July 21-23, a distinguished group of Russian, European, and North American academics and practitioners gathered for a live, virtual discussion of the status of women in Russian society.

Views on gender equality are currently mixed in Russia; on one hand, in 2017 the Government of Russia formally approved the "National Strategy for Women's Interests for 2017-2022". Through this program Russia has committed to instituting additional measures aimed at increasing employment of women, as well as creating positive conditions for career advancement and professional growth. On the other hand, by 2019 Russia ranked 131 among 198 countries with respect to the percentage of women currently occupying positions in the Lower House of Parliament<sup>2</sup>. In addition to this, Russia has the lowest instance of protection of women from violence among G20 countries<sup>3</sup>. With regards to gender equality, Russia is in a precarious situation. According to the Global Gender Gap Report of 2020, the geographical group of countries which includes Russia (Eastern Europe and Asia) experienced one of the highest instances of gender inequality at 76.7 %. Russia also ranked 81st in the individual index, placed between El Salvador (80th) and Ethiopia (82nd). This puts Russia on a par with the countries of the Middle East and North African region (MENA), which scored 60.5%<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, cross-national research on attitudes towards women in public life and concomitant issues of gender inequality hinges on the fact that Russia is a vast country made up of myriad communities marked by various traditional beliefs and negative female stereotypes.

The "woman question," as Russians historically have referred to the many complex issues related to gender inequality, has now receded from the national government agenda. Discussions during the conference focused on the present dynamics, challenges and available opportunities associated with six core themes: feminism, human rights and activism, women in politics and public administration, women in the workforce and labor market, family and motherhood, and the problem of gender-based violence and the measures needed to combat it. The articles within this journal reflect the attention given to the need for change. The range of genres, topics, and author profiles is indicative of the inclusive and international community the JIWS cultivates. The essays contained within this issue are broad in scope and richly diverse, each contributing to the global feminist cause.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/about-ipu/2020-07/impact-report-2019>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/data/oecd-international-development-statistics/gender-institutions-and-development-edition-2019\\_ba5dbd30-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/data/oecd-international-development-statistics/gender-institutions-and-development-edition-2019_ba5dbd30-en)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf)

Ann-Mari Sätre's study considers how women have responded to the conservative turn in society with respect to changes in the social policies of Russia, with a focus on women in government social services and local administration. Her empirical research offers a valuable insight into the differences in opinions among women in government positions as to whether they should support a return to traditional values or working towards a different agenda. The data provided consists of over 250 interviews on policies linked to poverty and social marginalization collected between 2010 and 2019 from the Nizhny Novgorod region, the Novgorod region, St Petersburg, the Arkhangelsk, and the Karelian Republic. Those interviewed include social work experts and other persons employed in local formal or informal organizations, most of them women.

Vanya Mark Solovey's essay considers the feminist movement in Russia as a reflection on useful tactics and its overarching goals centering on collective identity. In order to explore feminist attitudes towards and definitions of such tactics and goals, he draws upon qualitative research via interviews conducted with feminist activists.

Intersectionality is examined by Pisklakova-Parker Marina, Efanova Olga, Mari Davtyan, and Saida Siradzhudinova whose analysis of gender violence in Russia ranges from domestic violence to the practice of female genital mutilation and honor killings in the North Caucasus Republic of Russia.

Pisklakova-Parker Marina and Efanova Olga consider the influence of gender stereotypes on gender inequality and violence against women in modern Russia along with the response of government institutions and civil organizations to incidents of domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown. The authors pinpoint crucial factors acting as obstacles to exploring and combatting the phenomena of domestic violence, and in turn offer solutions.

Mari Davtyan's quantitative research explores court practices involving criminal cases related to female victims of domestic violence who have subsequently been charged with murder or intentional infliction of grievous bodily injuries to their partners. The author highlights problems such as non-recognition of domestic violence as a phenomenon in the Russian legal system, stereotypical attitudes towards cases of domestic violence and its survivors, and the refusal to investigate domestic violence incidents which lead to women being charged with crimes and thus losing their right to justice. This is followed by an article from Saida Siradzhudinova who contributes to the discourse of gender violence in the south of Russia. Her piece identifies the fundamental elements in the fight against extreme forms of domestic violence in the North Caucasus (such as female genital mutilation and "honor killings") and the role of NGOs in opposing them.

This special issue appears at a critical point in Russia's history: Russia recently witnessed protests in which women, united in outrage and despair, demanded the passing of laws against domestic violence. Simultaneously, the Federation Council (the Upper House of Russian parliament) presented a draft against domestic violence for public debate in November 2019. Unfortunately, consideration of the law in the State Duma was frozen, resulting in the law having not yet been accepted.

Globally, we have borne witness to increased violence against women and girls with rates soaring during the pandemic and women remaining less visible in international politics. The concept of women's empowerment discussed during the Kennan Institute conference has proven to be especially topical considering the contemporary landscape.