



## School-Leavers and Their Career Choices – Transition or Path Dependency in Russia?

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**Abstract.** A remarkable number of field-specific as well as interdisciplinary studies broach the issue of gender inequality and its relative persistence in economy (labour market and employment) and politics (government and society). Additionally, scholars often reveal deep-rooted gender-specific stereotypes that give an underpinning to certain decisions and gender-related behaviour irrespective of a country. According to these studies, women have frequently been underrepresented in the labour market and meet gender-specific career decisions that impede them to reach the highest positions in the economy. Whereas the majority of academic debates focus on established patterns of inequality going back to behaviour and institutions, far less are addressing the process of genesis of inequalities as well as the reasons for gender-specific decisions. This paper takes in consideration young people in Russia and their career choices at the end of the high school with respect to old (Soviet) ideals and stereotypes. Did a real transition of values and decision-making take place or do young generations hold an old pathway of dependency? I examine labour market intentions of young high-school-leavers in Russia. Firstly, I investigate how their occupational projects have undergone changes since 1990 till the present time. Secondly, it is of my interest to explain the mechanisms of this situation. For my investigation, I apply the concept of the ‘gender culture’ posed by Pfau-Effinger (1999).

**Keywords:** transition, path dependency, career choices, USSR, Russia

### Introduction

Occupational advancement of women in such important spheres of public life as economy (labour market and employment) and politics (government and society) in the countries of the former socialist block and Russia in particular is traditionally regarded as more complex than in Europe or North America due to deep-rooted economic risks and the societal changes of the last two decades (e.g. Bridger and Pine 1998, Pollert 2003, etc.). Thus, socially considered breadwinners

are more ready to assume risk, men pursue their careers in a more aggressive way than women. By doing so, they often displace women from their jobs or succeed in promotions in those spheres of economy that are regarded lucrative. Occupational chances of women are far from equal as compared to those of men, whereas gender discrimination and sensitivity are the derivatives of the gender dimension that had been developing during centuries in Russia. Actually, not only in post-socialist countries but also all over the world responsibilities of women have been till the nearest past concentrated in such spheres of life that were hardly favoured by men – housekeeping, childbearing, and maybe care (see for instance Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2006).

In the former USSR, all individuals of full age were obliged to work if they were not studying or caring for others. This obligation has been abolished by the breakdown of the Soviet regime, thus giving citizens a freedom of choice. Accordingly, younger cohorts can perform differently – regarding employment rate as well as occupational choices – as they can choose whether to work or not. Moreover, representatives of young cohorts may have different career choices as the generation of their parents had. The central question of this paper is therefore whether occupational choices of the youth changed in the transition period or remained the same as in socialist times, thus demonstrating a certain path dependency.

Whereas a solid body of research is tangent to mismatch between education and occupation in Russia, far less is known about aspirations of young people regarding their further education and employment (Avraamova 2004, Razumnikova 2004, Gimpelson et al. 2009). These young individuals are usually school-leavers who have no or very scarce labour market experience and demonstrate partly ideal cases of career choices including gendered strategies and ideas pertinent to future occupation. Moreover, adolescents as a respondent group itself is still not well-studied (de Leeuw et al. 2004). Thus, this paper investigates notions of school-leavers concerning their future labour market decisions and careers and as a consequence their educational aspirations since the latter ones can give a valuable explanation of whether and how cultural traditions relevant to labour market participation of women and men in the post-Soviet space change.

The purpose of this study is to reduce the gap in the empirical literature on gendered career choices in post-Soviet Russia by using the data collected in 2007 in one of the major cities of Russia. In this paper, I examine career choices of young school-leavers pertinent to the labour market and associated with the educational system in Russia. First, I investigate whether the orientations of girls in relation to career have changed, since decisions of females are more significant for this case. Secondly, I try to explain the case of Russia.

I deliberately use the concept of aspirations while examining career choices since they represent one of the key explanatory concepts of further educational and

occupational career developments of young people. Indeed, aspirations precede the early educational decisions and young adult educational and occupational aspirations precede adult occupational outcomes (Sewell et al. 1969). Therefore, it seems appropriate to apply the framework of aspirations since they are more informative regarding the impact of social context and institutional constraints on further educational and occupational decisions of youth. Besides, analysing very early career decisions of upper secondary school-leavers may help shedding more light onto the discussion of gender segregation on the labour market in Russia than attempts that study career trajectories already shaped long before (Ivanchenko 2005, Maltseva 2005, etc.).

In order to study changes in the intentions and orientations of young women in the labour market, I use the concept of the ‘gender culture’ posed by Pfau-Effinger (1999). The concept of ‘gender culture’ (gender way of life) is defined as a ‘historically set pattern of imperious attitudes between men and women and as definitions of female and male in a given society’ (Connell 1987: 98–99), and it elucidates whether and under what conditions career choices of women change in the Soviet and post-Soviet stages of development.

## **(Young) women during and after socialism**

### **Before the collapse of the USSR**

There exists a substantial body of research that represents diverse ideological perspectives regarding women and their predestination (e.g. Ecklein 1984). This paper undertakes an attempt to go beyond these traditions, thus regarding the roots of women’s gender roles and the most recent trends of post-socialist times.

The Soviet state raised and expected (young) people to take a quite subordinated position concerning their decisions: since the five-year plans of economic development suggested concrete growth rates as well as a certain number of education/work places and many steps in state institutions were thus predestined, it led to a discrepancy between desires and opportunities of especially young people. In other words, they had to be satisfied with the available resources that often restricted their social mobility chances. Additionally, entrepreneurship, and hence a sound competition, were prohibited by the state, which recognized morbid symptoms of capitalism in it. Furthermore, the youth was guided by senior peers who always knew a better way to handle problems or life circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The bounds of youth and being young in the Soviet Union were considerably expanded and reached the age of 40, whereas senior peers were habitually represented by aged persons that held their positions until their late 70s. As a consequence, a very tense situation dominated in life domains.

Such states of affair led to the fact that, over time, youth grew up weak-willed and dependent on the decisions and attitudes of others. Indeed, previous studies show that dependence was considered a typical feature of the greatest part of the Soviet youth until the end of the Soviet period (Serikova 2004 etc.). It is implicit that young people of Russia and primarily of the USSR had already possessed this quality for a long period of time: sociological studies came to similar conclusions (e.g. Bykova and Chuprov 1991). Moreover, researchers argue that ‘...for both men and women, qualities associated with individual motivation such as achievement, personal responsibilities, ambition and initiative, were traditionally treated with suspicion’ (Lange 2008: 332). At the beginning of the 1990s, sociologists revealed that in the situation of economic shortcomings and instability the youth hopes for the aid of relatives and – most important – does not wish to change anything due to their own poverty. Additionally, young people consider the latter one to be a natural, habitual condition. This is especially acutely represented among girls and young women (Bykova and Chuprov 1991).

By the end of the Soviet era, the youth had possessed an extremely low self-esteem and lacked the sense of entrepreneurship in all of its manifestations (Bykova and Chuprov 1991). Supremacy in issues of entrepreneurship was considered a ‘man’s business’, success continued to be a status attribute of men (Pfau-Effinger 2000), and men were still considered breadwinners despite the establishment of the dual breadwinner model in the USSR (Çermaková 1999). Given that men had always had more advantageous wages (in comparison with those of women) and incommensurably privileged positions on the ‘labour’ market, the status of the head of the family – at least nominally – much more frequently belonged to them. Additionally, the image, a stereotype of a man who is earning more than his wife has been deeply rooted in the consciousness and is considered a categorical imperative up to the present days.

It is obvious that such state of affairs is a consequence of a certain ‘gender culture’ that was built and institutionalized by the Soviet state. As S. Ajvazova reasonably mentions, in the USSR, ‘... two social roles were assigned to a woman – “a toiler” and “a mother”’ (Ajvazova 2001: 43), i.e. the political arrangement has actually attributed two mandatory functions to women: a role of working full time (as a rule on positions either not demanding special education or requiring a low qualification) and women obligated to simultaneously carry out the role of ‘the family keeper’. Nevertheless – according to the conclusions of S. Ashwin (1999) – the combination of the active participation of women in public (working) life while taking care of a family was an ideal and a desirable purpose and by no means an oppression or enthrallment for numerous Soviet women.

As a result, the institutionalized gender culture has improved the position of women to some extent, having them ‘included’ into employment relationship and at the same time having obliged them to carry out several social roles simultaneously.

Thus, for example, for years to come, the proportion of employed women was equal with men: 51% vs. 49% (Ajvazova 2001; Rosstat 2005, 2013). Such pattern of behaviour – roles overlapping – could not disappear overnight but remained habitual throughout an extensive period of time, representing a desirable image of a successful woman. From these, I derive my first hypothesis that Russian female school-leavers of the post-transition period are more likely to consider both public and private lives, being less inclined to choose a typically female profession.

### After the year 1990

The second half of the 1990s is mainly characterized by the fact that the proportion of women in the labour market had substantially decreased by virtue of various reasons (Sillaste 2000, Roudenko and Murtozaev 2004). Principally, these were those least economically protected and overrepresented in risky or socially stigmatized occupations/work places (individuals of either pre-pension or of retirement age as well as young girls) or women who deliberately decided to drop out from employment. Young girls have streamed into education and training, thus having chosen education either as an alternative to unemployment or as a source of human capital in the labour market. As a consequence, educational expansion took its next, so far the largest round in the recent post-socialist history (young women persistently exceeded the level of educational enrolment and qualification of men during the Soviet period) (see *Table 1*).

**Table 1.** Number of employed women, by age-groups and by educational level, in percentage

Year	Age, years		With tertiary education
	Till 20	20–24	
1992	3.4	9.3	17.4
1995	2.6	10.2	20.1
1998	1.4	9.0	22.6
2000	2.8	8.9	22.6
2005	2.0	9.5	26.1
2008	1.7	10.1	29.7
2010	1.2	9.6	31.2

Source: The Russian Statistical Yearbook, 2005, 2013

According to *Table 1*, it is evident that the proportion of economically active females at the age of 20 and less has reduced more than twice in the labour market. At the same time, the educational level of employed women has significantly grown. The similar tendency will obviously remain as long as the economic uncertainty exceeds the normal rate of growth and political system

along with the social one undergoes substantial alterations. Mills & Blossfeld (2005) explain such situation by arguing that “young adults opt (...) for the role as a student instead of becoming unemployed in the process of transition from youth to adulthood. The educational system then serves as a reservoir for otherwise unemployed youth (...)” (Mills and Blossfeld 2005: 11).

The number of school-leavers entering universities in order to obtain a diploma in economic specialities, management, etc. increases from year to year. For example, the proportion of girls studying economics and law had virtually exceeded twice those of men by 2010 (Rosstat 2015). The same picture can be observed in education and pedagogy (Rosstat 2015). However, enrolment rates in these traditional female fields of study did not diminish throughout the transition period. In contrast, admissions in typically female occupations increased also in the course of educational expansion in Russia: the amount of enrolments in education and training almost tripled during the 15 years of Russian transformation.

The gender asymmetry was one of the significant features of the labour market in the middle and the second half of the 1990s, or, better to say, it did not diminish as compared to the Soviet period. Despite formally better qualifications, women much more rarely manage to obtain considerable promotions and to equalize the wage level with that of the men during this period of time (see Rimashevskaya 2006, Roschin and Solntsev 2006). Some researchers argue that this state of affairs might be caused by the inherited complicacy of combining the roles of worker and wife/mother simultaneously, a routine as well as an explicit shortcoming of the social policy: the latter ones hardly ever took into account the employment interests and orientations of women and scarcely cared for providing female workers with advancements in the labour sphere (Ajvazova 2001). Other scholars are inclined to believe that under severe economic conditions, women who feel themselves responsible for the future of their family are more liable to take any job or stay at the old one in order to have earnings, thus even losing their social status (Ashwin 2000). Both hypotheses seem to reflect the reality although the first one contravenes with the fact that women – despite the Soviet legacy – are actively engaged in entrepreneurship regardless both of a legislative base that is far from being perfect and of an obvious lack of state support. This is striking since ‘an extraordinary obstacle for women are legal aspects of starting own business and a constant struggle with extortion’ (Babaeva and Chirikova 1996: 77). Nevertheless, it does not seem to be an obstacle for Russian women and for persons wishing to run their own business: studies indicate that employment plays an extremely important role in the life of a modern woman (see Leitzel 1995, Turetskaya 2001, Chirikova 2003, Roschin and Solntsev 2005, etc.).

In the mid-1990s, an American researcher, F. Markowitz conducted a large-scale sociological study devoted to problems and life plans of the Russian youth. A set of interviews had shown that girls preferred purely female and ‘caring’ jobs (work at school, kindergarten, teaching as an alternative), i.e. they were going to obtain

traditionally ‘female’ occupations allowing them to take care of the family, and believed their future partners could protect them and their children from market uncertainties (Markowitz 2000). At the same time, youth considers that the most popular occupations are IT-specialist, lawyer, and entrepreneur (Bogoslovskaya 2006). Those who have already made their future career choice report to having obtained information about it from TV (67%) or parents (50%) (Timchenko and Sokolova 2011). This circumstance implies that school-leavers rely on general beliefs and the parents’ resources of choosing a profession. Other investigations demonstrate that adult Russian women are more familiar with traditional spheres of employment and education than with business since they tend to see themselves more as helpers than as independent leaders at work and in society (Petrenko and Mitina 2001). Moreover, Russian women have negative attitudes towards employment in traditionally male professions: the latter ones do not require qualifications, are of no prestige and low-paid (construction workers, porters). ‘Male’ occupations are associated with heavy physical labour, risk, liability, and technical work, whereas ‘female’ ones are linked with care, children, and office work (Kozina 2002, Shelekhov et al. 2011). Most strikingly, scholars do not find significant differences between the opinions of males and females (Kozina 2002).

As shown, different studies result in different descriptions and explanations of the school-leavers’ gendered career choices. What is true beyond these findings? Is this dichotomy a Soviet legacy, a dependency on the established gender culture, or is it an indicator of Russian transition? The second hypothesis states that the Soviet gender culture is less likely to have a direct impact on school-leavers’ career choices and is mediated through their parents.

## **Data and sample selection procedures**

The primary data used in this investigation were collected in one of the largest cities of Russia, St. Petersburg, in 2007. Since the overwhelming majority of datasets deal with adults (i.e. the earliest age of participation in a survey is 18) and the focus of this study is upper secondary school-leavers, who in Russia are aged 16–17 on average, a method of personal interview was chosen in order to address the issue, thus giving the study a qualitative character. Moreover, even if some datasets contain questions to young adults, they usually deal with success at school, relations within families and their interdependency with parental background (see for instance GGS).

The main question of the analysis tackled the beliefs and preferences of young people concerning the role of a woman in the labour market. From this starting point, I intended to observe and explain how the shift from dependence and obedience to individual motivation and activity had occurred.



The investigation consisted of two steps: first, respondents answered open-ended questions resulting in a total of 149 completed questionnaires. The questionnaire aimed to reveal a general background of school-leavers: what occupations they consider popular and lucrative; whether or not they want to study after school; what professions they regard as desirable for them. Six upper secondary schools with a wide range of profiles – the graduation of which entitles students to proceed to the institutions of tertiary level – were taken into account. Each class was made up of about 25 students. The selection of schools was based on the principle of randomization, although the city districts were specified: representatives of both central and peripheral districts were included into the study. As a second step, 20 boys and girls have been selected randomly to conduct deeper semi-structured interviews. A corresponding guide consisted of three main sections: educational aspirations and career prospects of the school-leavers (decisions on institutions of tertiary level, career choices, parental background), beliefs and notions concerning the labour market (popular occupations, state of the labour market), and the role of women on the labour market and in family (ideals, future prospects, own wishes).

All interviews, each lasting about 20 minutes, were supplemented with notes. In this paper, every interview is designated with three symbols: the first one indicates the school number, the second one the respondent's number, and the third one the respondent's gender.

## **Aspirations and career choices**

As outlined above, studies show diverse notions of young girls regarding career choices in Russia. These are significantly split into two opposite directions, thus following traditional stereotypes, on the one hand, and new opportunities of obtaining self-esteem and female market power, on the other hand. My investigation results turn out likewise.

Results of the answers in the background survey revealed that an overwhelming majority of school-leavers had been seeking to study further – i.e. to get enrolled into tertiary education. This outcome can be interpreted as an indirect signal of the economic advancement of families the respondents came from. Indeed, most of them seemed to be able to afford a non-working student. Moreover, the answers indicated the growing prestige and demand of tertiary education. Furthermore, based on the questionnaire, I could distinguish occupations that were popular among school-leavers. These were as follows: engineer, sharing its popularity with economist/accountant, manager, IT-specialist, lawyer, designer, etc. Remarkably, female respondents pointed out such occupations as lawyer, manager, and designer as often as their male counterparts did.



Against the general background of the questionnaire feedback, interviews with selected school-leavers delivered deeper insight into aspirations and preferences pertinent to the problematic of transition. First, while trying to figure out which occupations school-leavers choose and whether these are associated with the socialist legacy, I observed that young girls often mentioned professions that enjoyed popularity in the moment of investigation. This is an indicator speaking against typical female career choices. However, teenagers considered entrance exams into tertiary institutions as very challenging – an obstacle for many to study a desired speciality. Therefore, career choices were frequently adjusted to institutional settings such as limited study places at universities:

“Finance would be a great subject to study – but it is out of question for me... I would never pass the exams... I thought of submitting my documents to three different universities in order to safeguard myself against failure” (2-8-f).

“To tell the truth, I do not care much what to study. The main thing is to study something I can master... like pedagogy or social work, I am not sure yet. I hope my parents would help me to enter the university” (116-19-f).

“I thought of studying architecture since it is not that wild as engineering but still allows a woman to advance in work... Difficult is that I do not have any contacts to the academy I want to enter, but I study hard to pass the entrance exams. And I will submit my documents to two different institutions...” (29-7-f).

“Designer is my dream – it would be nice to work in an office but at home as well if my family needs me” (105-18-f).

As I could observe, career choices differed in the sense which domain girls consider more important – family, job, or both. For that reason, I can state that the Soviet legacy still exists, but the way it influences the decision-making process of the respondents is different.

“Well, for me, it is obvious, of course – my two biggest wishes are family and a great job! You may perceive it as an adolescent’s romantic dreams, but I guess each person wishes him- or herself a cosy corner with the love of the nearest relatives and financial stability. After all, my mama managed it, why should I fail there?” (2-8-f).

“You know, my mama didn’t work since papa was earning good and she spent all her life with me and my brother and family affairs. Although it might be life without much stress, I don’t think I want to repeat it, not in the least because I see how mothers of my classmates work and are pretty good in both job and family” (116-4-f).

“For me, my future job is on the first place. I see myself as a successful business woman who can advance without any help of men” (29-5-f).

Interestingly, girls act or wish to act either from the point of view of contradiction (mothers as housekeepers, daughters – both job and family; mothers – traditional, daughters – innovative) or proceeding from conformity (if mothers have managed, daughters should also). Thus, it became apparent that the double burden seems to be nothing special for the interviewed girls, but it was mediated through the prism of socialization:

“I know it’s difficult to work and to take care of family, but I guess nowadays women have better opportunities than our mothers and grannies had. They had only kindergartens and ... yes, everyone could work, but still I think private services could also be a help for me in the future” (105-12-f).

“Surely, men have it better, but that’s why I study – in order to get a good job! Qualification is the only instrument one can use in order to get to the top” (344-14-f).

Remarkably, young men adhere to the similar opinion as girls by considering the double burden not an insuperable obstacle but a normal life circumstance:

“I think, everyone has to make it through one day. Otherwise, how have we all achieved what we have now?” (157-9-m).

I could detect an alteration in career choices: if girls chose typically female occupations earlier (in the Soviet times), now these were gradually male domains as well: entrepreneurship, economics, and management are some of the typical fields young women indicated they wanted to study after school graduation. At the same time, young girls who unconsciously reflected the socialist constellation of double burden indeed aspired to balance private and public lives. However, the occupations they chose were typical of women. Besides, school-leavers relied on parents’ help in form of economic or social capital. This finding implies that “classic” female occupations mainly result from parents’ wish to maintain social status inside the family. Furthermore, girls often anticipated financial independence in future as they did not see themselves as suppressed or the subordinates of men on the labour market:

“Well, my mama worked as a cook at one enterprise and never had any promotions, whereas papa – an engineer – enjoyed advancements, good salary and sometimes even international trips” (105-2-f).

“You know, my mama defended her doctoral thesis when I was 3. So, why should I shy away from this competition?” (2-3-f).

In contrast, those who either have not decided yet what to study or relied on the parents' help did not seem to think much over the consequences of their decisions. Instead, they counted on the further assistance of parents or of a future partner. Female school-leavers who were not interested in occupation related to lucrative sectors of economy intended to enter those universities and colleges where they expected to benefit from so-called connections or supports. In contrast, those school-leavers who have chosen law or economics as a field of study have done it independently since they were at least interested in the subject or relied on future returns of education in terms of a stable income. Interestingly, regarding the choice of occupation, the overwhelming majority of the girls mentioned at first interest (75%), secondly, a decent income after studies (25%), and only then connections or support (20%) (Serikova 2004).<sup>2</sup>

All in all, my sample illustrates the ambivalence of the career choices young girls meet: the concept of a working man and a female housekeeper is supported by 61.4% of the girls. At the same time, 73% of the surveyed young women reported that the best way of being independent for a woman is to have a paid job. Girls often aspire to (financial) independence and see their self-realization in the future work instead of hoping to make a good match for successful men. In other words, representatives of the young generation who act on the premise of the available information connect restrictions with a demographic and economic situation and opportunities. This finding has been indirectly confirmed by Sillaste: ‘the overwhelming majority of Russian women (66%) consider that the best way to become independent is to have a job’ (Sillaste 2000). Moreover, it is consistent with other studies: Ashwin (2006) confirms that women associate paid work with aspiration to provide themselves financial and psychological independence from men. Balabanova also shows that women are dependent on their husbands only in the case when they either do not have their own income (i.e. a paid job) or in the case of a low level of income (Balabanova 2006).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Social shock going hand in hand with uncertainty and instability during and after the reforms in Russia has not only dramatically changed the very context of gender relations but it has also influenced the educational and occupational choices of the youth. Whereas a great body of research has focused on adults, far less has been documented on adolescents and their views of their own future in

2 The answer options aggregately exceed 100% due to the several answer options possible.

such important life domains as (further) education and employment. By analysing and explaining the career choices of young people in Russia, it is possible to predict further developments in the educational system and labour market in the country that is still exposed to transformation reverberations. Moreover, it can give fruitful impulses to social policy and let it intervene in the most acute problems of social life in Russia.

In order to reduce the existing gap in examining the intentions of school-leavers in Russia, I have screened the most important notions of youth pertinent to education and employment in St. Petersburg, one of the biggest cities in Russia. Indeed, the career choices of adolescents in Russia are still scarcely explored, whilst they represent a very illustrative, ambiguous picture of social changes in gender relations and life courses.

My study has revealed a clear ambivalence of values and career choices of the Russian school-leavers of the mid-2000s, which is not surprising: apart from having inherited some typical features of the Soviet 'gender culture', especially young girls witness the process of the establishment of female entrepreneurship and feminist movement in Russia, which may address them and their own career choices. On the one hand, a part of the respondents follow the path of dependency in their occupational decisions by choosing typically female professions or hoping for the parents' help. On the other hand, girls are eager to balance work and private life in the future and to choose fields of study that used to be untypical of women in socialist times. A certain change of career choices can be explained by the growth of the group of highly educated women in leading positions, the increase of women's self-esteem, and a spread of "new" values by the mass media. However, deep-rooted stereotypes are not likely to be modified overnight as they need generations in order to change.

All in all, my analysis has shown that the aspirations of school-leavers would satisfy almost any social or economic situation; their occupational preferences would suit any stage of business cycle, thus leaving future employees enough space for a job choice with an average salary. The career choices of interviewed school-leavers have become productive, thus indicating that both males and females have at least partly turned towards pragmatism and goal-orientation. However, while males clearly indicated an interesting job as a desired goal for the future, the opinions of females divided into such categories as job or family or both. Furthermore, the career choices of school-leavers are mediated by their parents: the interviewed females could describe the activities their mothers had performed in their job and derived their future job content and occupational aspirations based on those experiences.

Thus, this study cannot claim an end of the post-socialist transition for the disparities young girls incorporate regarding 'double burden' and work-life balance – a challenge to be investigated by conducting a follow-up study in the nearest future.

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