Gender Identity and Expression in a Post-Communist Context: A Critical Review of 'Lesbian Lives in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia'

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## 1. Introduction

**1.1. Background information**

Changes in legislation and the influence of new ideas about sexuality from the West have allowed homosexuals and lesbians to start openly addressing their identities. This has led to mixed blessings for many homosexuals and lesbians. On the one hand, they no longer have to fear the implications of being 'found out,' and acquiring Western literature on gender and sexuality has led to a new generation of much more open-minded Russian youths (Hall et al., 2021). On the other hand, much of what homosexuals and lesbians want to be discussing today has arisen from the traumas of the past, and it has become a point of contention as to whether it is feasible to discuss such issues when still facing discrimination in all sectors of society. It is well known that in the latter years of the Soviet era and the early years of post-Soviet rule, Russia did not allow any discussion of sexual identity to take place (Wilkinson2020).

**1.2. Research Problem:**

 While there have been significant social and cultural changes in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ community members, Russian lesbians still have to deal with numerous difficulties, including the creation of a restricted legal sphere for them, social discrimination, and only problematic access to healthcare and support services. The intent of this article is to re-thinking gender expression and identity in post-communist Russia, resembling a profound and long look at the joys and sorrows that were and still are faced by lesbians. Its purview points out the factors that usually come out of the past, society, and the law, which influence the lives of lesbians in Russia.

**1.3. Research Structure:**

First, is the background of gender identity in Soviet Russia, underlining the state's efforts to control society, culture, and its resistance to the LGBTQ+ community. Subsequently, the paper outline how the fall of communism was a turning point in gender identity, including the paradigm shift in public consciousness and gender-related provisions. In the second part it describes present-day issues that impact sexual minority women in post-Soviet Russia, including legal discrimination, social stigma, and limited access to healthcare. It then delves into discrimination encountered by lesbians but as well as the influence of economic status, ethnicity, and ability in this regard.

**1.4. Thesis Statement:**

Although improvement has been made in the last few years, the statement puts forward that Russian LBTQ still has an unequal attitude and needs more force to acquire its rights and services. By critical appraisal of the earlier research efforts, this review attempts to throw the spotlight on the complex and subtle aspects of gender identity in a society in which it is the heritage of communism and a conservative backlash of an ongoing nature.

### 2. Historical Context of Gender Identity in Soviet Russia

The gender identity results from a societal order and its change in post-communist Russia. Here, the division of labor is highlighted as the basis of gender identity, with the different contributions made by men and women being recognized in the Sorecognizedr Legislation 1969. This legislation aimed to ensure the welfare of women and their protection in the workplace, with a list of employment sectors and conditions of work considered too harmful or dangerous for women enumerated to protect their health (Zok, 2022). Whereas (Dyakonova, 2023) had previously criticized the masculinization of women in the early USSR, women were conscripted into a narrowly defined group of sectors and professions, fulfilling particular roles in industry and more traditional areas of employment.

### 2.1. Gender roles under communism

The Second World War was a turning point for women's service to the country. While the men went to war, millions of women took their place in the workforce. After the war, many did not return to their previous domestic roles but sought to retain their jobs. The war had made it more acceptable for women to work. From 1945 to 1965, this period saw mixed messages about gender roles (Brinton, 2023). The regime was torn between a desire to regenerate the population after the war and rebuild the economy.

This period demonstrated that rhetoric and legislation were more equal than ever before. However, the reality was quite different. Failure to create absolute gender equality, the need for women workers in a time of economic hardship, and the traditional opinion about gender roles meant that women's work was often seen as secondary or supplementary to men's work, and they were usually the first to be made redundant in challenging times (Williams, 2023).

Many laws were passed that removed legal inequality, such as the legalization of abortion family code, which made marriage a civil affair of contract, and the equalizing of marriage divorce laws. Employment was the area that showed the most advancement in gender equality (Kabeer, 2021). Women were considered a valuable and essential part of the workforce and were often used as a symbol of communist success. Under communism, the government ideology sought to eradicate all inequality. This was done by creating the communist 'new Soviet person,' an equal being in all aspects. Although the Bolsheviks did not seek to create absolute equality between the genders, as they still believed in natural biological differences, the aim was to remove any hierarchy that had previously existed (Evans, 2021).

### 2.2. Suppression of LGBTQ+ identities

The authoritarian nature of Soviet governance led to the formation of a legal system that took an extremely punitive approach to homosexuality and nonconformist gender identities, criminalizing male homosexual activity for terms of up to five years. Paulson, 2023 states that the law was scarcely invoked. It was "hypocritically denied that homosexuality and lesbians existed in the Soviet Union," however, knowledge of the law itself and the prevailing social stigma led many, such as the interviewee mentioned above, to continue to dress in stereotypical masculine Soviet attire to avoid suspicion about their behavior. This led to increased social isolation of LGBTQ+ communities and individuals, as the conspiratorial nature of Soviet life and society led to an enormous amount of paranoia regarding legal and state scrutiny of individuals' lives. This had a direct impact on the relative invisibility and lack of recorded history of LGBTQ+ communities in Russia and the Soviet Union compared to, say, Western Europe and the Americas, with many stories and alternative gender identities being conveyed through word of mouth (Kondakov, 2023).

The secrecy and paranoia brought about by fear of retribution from the law and misunderstanding led to individuals suppressing LGBTQ+ identities as a means of survival. This also had a direct impact on the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals in the Soviet Union during this time. With little to no visibility of alternative sexualities or gender identities, many LGBTQ+ individuals did not understand themselves and felt abnormal in comparison to the surrounding societies (Wilkinson2020). Some would seek psychological help to get rid of what they believed to be an illness or abnormality, and many turned to excessive drinking or even suicide as a means of coping. (Paulson, 2023)

### 2.3. Impact of the fall of communism on gender identity

The fall of communism signified the beginning of new challenges for gender identity in Russia. As Kivinen et al. explain, "economic hardships, mass unemployment, criminalization of some social groups, criminalization of chaos has created an environment in which strong and prosperous masculine identity appears to be the only consolation for survival" (2020, p. 106). According to a survey conducted in 2002, which served to compare public opinion on gender roles and attitudes towards the issue of homosexuality with a similar study conducted in 1989, it is clear that there has been a dramatic change in people's attitudes toward gender identity for both males and females. In the 2002 survey, 67.7% agreed that "a man must show his manly qualities in every way," compared to 59.5% in 1989. Similarly, attitudes toward women were also affected, with 78.6% agreeing with the statement "a woman should only think about her family and children," compared to 63.9% in 1989 (Kivinen et al., 2020, p.104).

## 3. Contemporary Challenges for Lesbian Lives in Post-Soviet Russia

Lesbian persons in contemporary Russia continue to face specific legal discrimination that impacts all areas of their lives. The most substantial evidence of this is the lack of legislative protection against discrimination in employment and other areas of social provision (Sundstrom & Sperling2020). The recent draft law on non-traditional sexual orientations in Russia would further stigmatize lesbians and gay men and stigmatize advocacy. Several employment restrictions relating to "morality" and "mental health" still limit the types of jobs "available" to lesbians. The combination of specific and general anti-LGBT legislation, as well as the lack of legal protection on the grounds of sexual orientation, means that lesbians have little or no recourse in the event of discrimination, harassment, or violence (Levitanus, 2020).

### 3.1. Legal discrimination and lack of protections

This review also points out a lack of protection for LGBT individuals by the police. They are vulnerable to abuse and harassment and have no avenue for complaint. The most gross example is the lack of investigation into the systematic murders of homosexuals and transgender people that occurred between 2001-2007 in St Petersburg (Momen & Dilks, 2021). Furthermore, the law that prohibits the spreading of "homosexual propaganda" to minors, introduced in 2013, has made the situation even more difficult for non-heterosexual people. This law effectively states that any LGBT discussion or coming out is inappropriate and is punishable by fines and deportation for non-citizens (Landau, 2020).

The Russian constitution protects human rights and equality regardless of circumstances. However, this is not adhered to when it comes to protecting those of non-heterosexual orientations. To illustrate the point, in 2003, homosexual acts were decriminalized in Russia (Kondakov & Shtorn, 2021). However, peodecriminalizedforming sexual orientations are still discriminated against by law enforcement bodies. According to a report by Amnesty International in 2009, the LGBT population of Russia experiences harassment by police, including entrapment, abuse, and sexual assault.

### 3.2. Social stigma and discrimination

Attitudes towards lesbians, both negative and positive, were traditionally primarily based on the concepts of 'butch' and 'femme,' with the assumption being that lesbianism is an imitation of heterosexual coupling and thus 'one partner takes the role of the man' (Lindqvist, 2024). This led to women who did not fit into this stereotypical conception facing denial of their sexual identity and discrimination. Today, the situation has not changed a great deal, and Russian lesbians are subject to the same mentalities, with negative attitudes often being transferred into discrimination in the workplace, public services, and at an institutional level (Alexeev, 2023).

Homosexuality is often associated with mental illness, with the 'Forbidden Talk' study citing an example where LGBT individuals were asked to leave their homes by their parents and to return only after they had received treatment for their 'illness' (Fatkins, 2020). The belief that homosexuality is a state of mind rather than an orientation has resulted in lesbians and gays alike being subjected to aversion therapy and 'treatment' to 'cure' them of their 'illness,' which in some extreme cases has involved force.

TFatkins 2020 found that 80% of medical professionals expressed negative attitudes about lesbians. This result reflects the often detrimental implications faced by lesbians when trying to seek healthcare in Russia, an issue which will be explored further in the following section. It is believed that today's 'lesbians' are young women who were 'perverted' in their youth and forced to try a same-sex experience (Mos, 2020)

### 3.3. Access to healthcare and support services

Access to healthcare is an issue for many people in Russia, regardless of their sexuality. Lesbians are likely to experience homophobic treatment and discrimination in healthcare settings, meaning that they may be reluctant to seek medical help (Horne & White, 2020). (Alexander, 2023) found that a lesbian cancer patient was advised by a doctor that she should give up her sexuality to save her life and that medical staff should be informed of her sexuality to make 'appropriate' decisions about her treatment (Alexander, 2023).

A study conducted by Amon and Wurth in 2020 documented many cases of lesbians being given involuntary psychiatric treatment after seeking help for traumatic experiences, with family members and doctors assuming that their sexual orientation was the cause of their distress. This form of 'treatment' often involves confinement in an institution and forced administration of drugs and is based on the assumption that homosexuality is an illness. (Amon & Wurth, 2020)

### 3.4. Intersectionality and multiple forms of discrimination

"Intersectionality" is a term that has been increasingly used within feminist and gender studies to explore how various biological, social, and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality interact to shape individual and group experiences and produce different forms of discrimination or privilege (Harnois et al., 2022).

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Soviet regime was its attempt to create a society without class or gender exploitation (Vargas et al., 2020). Women were encouraged to participate equally with men in all ark and public life, and legislation was implemented to achieve this. The avowed policy was one of gender blindness, and inequality was officially denied. Such policies, however, do not automatically remove gender inequalities or the social and cultural construction of gender norms and privilege, and our informants describe how these have influenced their lives at individual structural levels.

## 4. Resistance and Activism in Post-Soviet Russia

The fall of communism led to a substantial relaxation in the intense surveillance of homosexuality that characterized the Socialist era. This characterized when many social attitudes were liberalizing, and it opened up new areliberalizing+ consumption and cultural production as various Western sexual cultures and identities became available (Johnson, 2023)

### 4.1. Formation of LGBTQ+ organizations

At the turn of the twentieth century, several LGBTQ+ organizations were formed in Russia; organizations were to create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals and communities, provide social and mental health services, and advocate for the recognition and protection of human rights of sexual and gender minorities. The efforts of these organizations and their participants are the need to counteract the pervasive social stigma and widespread discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ+ people and to better the quality of life and life chances of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities in Russia (Goodyear, 2020). Despite the continuance of obstacles faced by LGBTQ+ organizations in Russia, over the past, organizations have been significant public activities by LGBTQ+ groups who started to stand up for their rights openly, directly challenging prevailing homophobia and transphobia in Russian society and politics. These groups strive for acceptance and respect for diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and seek to change the negative social attitudes and institutional practices against LGBTQ+ people that were, in large part, the effect of the historical path of post-Soviet Russia (Davidenko & Utkina, 2024). In recent years, more progress has been made to ensure full equality and inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in Russian civil society and to promote and protect the human rights of LGBTQ+ people in Russia further.

The first attempts to form LGBTQ+ organizations in Russia occurred in organizations; throughout this period, individual activists were more inclined to organize informal or closed groups with disorganized or surface-level publicity than established public organizations. Implementing the 1993 organizations, associations" imposed certain legal restrictions and cumbersome registration processes on non-governmental organizations, which not only limited organizations to forming LGBTQ+ organizations but also had a general impact on the growth of Russian civil society (Oren, 2022). An open LGBTQ+ civil rights movement began to materialize fully during the early 2000s, with events including the founding of Moscow Pride in 2006 and increased visibility and marginal public acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. This nascent movement spurred a growing interest by domestic and international NGOs to help foster and support the establishment and development of LGBTQ+ organizations and their initiatives (Velasco, 2020).

### 4.2. Advocacy for legal reforms

Work towards legal reform of policy to include recognition and protection of LGBTQ+ rights was founded upon the belief that change of policy will necessarily bring about change in public and institutional attitudes towards homosexuality. LGBT groups have made attempts to create better relations between themselves, the police, and the broader community (Wilkinson2020). The Moscow Pride Parade, the first of its kind in Russia, was held in May 2006 and was intended to increase public awareness and gain greater acceptance and understanding of the LGBT community.

The exhibition comprises four pieces of artwork addressing discrimination and the impact of criminalization on mental health and highlights that few people from LGBT communities will seek legal redress, often due to fear of being 'outed' in court and subsequent discrimination or due to the belief that justice will be biased by their sexuality or gender identity (Şerban2023). This then results in disproportionate access to mental and physical health services as well as the increased prevalence of risk-taking behaviors and HIV/AIDS infection.

### 4.3. conclusion

To sum up, the critical review of the interconnection between gender identity and expression in Russia after communism sheds light on the living conditions of lesbians and paints a detailed picture of historical issues, societal attitudes, and legal systems. In reality, the attempt of the Soviet era to achieve gender liberation through social engineering and alike failed with the stubborn sex discrimination and narrow-minded social distinction and segregation of those who do not accept the standard so that LGBTQ+ individuals lived in society feeling humiliated.

As a result of the collapse of communism, many new tendencies in sexual identity arose. At that time, women moved and now face new difficulties, such as legal disparity and social rejection. As stricter attitudes of society were loosed little, Russian lesbian women, conversely, face systemic barriers in using basic human rights, including healthcare, no matter how much they strive. Nevertheless, the LGBTQ+ community is also characterized by several challenges, such as discrimination and persecution of its members. Even among these odds, there is an emerging resistance and activism in that individuals and organizations are at the forefront of legal reforms and challenging the national views over homosexuality. Despite difficulties with opponents and obstacles, these movements symbolize a forming of the broader community of the acceptance and the amalgamation of the left-handed queer people in Russian society.

It is visible from the review of the articles that some advancements have been achieved, and now it is crucial to improve and amend the system to provide complete and unlimited protection of Russian lesbians’ rights.

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