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Wealth, inequality, and sex: the changes in female and male wealth and their consequences for the governance of the Russian Empire from the 1700s to the 1850s\*

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## Abstract

Could we measure the contribution of women to the economy in the pre-industrial world? Yes, it is possible, particularly in the context of Russia. By analyzing archival sources, we can not only measure their contribution to the economy but also observe how the Russian Empire evolved into a more economically patriarchal society over time. Examining the distribution of female property across various regions in Russia reveals a significant increase in the share of female property the 18th century, rising from 10% to 40%. However, this growth plateaued and gradually declined. By the late 19th century, the presence of women among top landowners continued to decrease. This substantial surge in female property ownership during the 18th century occurred primarily due to the increasing frequency of women being designated heirs. Using the unique datasets, I assessed the gender gap in wealth and income, which averaged around 25% across provinces. This indicates that the equal access to property established in 1715 led to Russia becoming a relatively gender-equal country over the following century. Consequently, noblewomen in the Russian Empire gained proxy voting rights. Interestingly, the authorities granted this fundamental civil right independently, without significant societal debate on the 'female question'.

JEL Codes: N00, N13, N33, J16, D63

Keywords: Russian Empire, Gender, Wealth, Income, Pre-Industrial World

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Being in Saint Petersburg in the 1800s, Martha Wilmot wrote about Russian aristocrats to her sister: *'You must know that every Woman has the right over her own Fortune totally independent of her Husband and he is as independent of his Wife. Marriage, therefore, is no union of interests whatsoever, and the Wife if she has a large Estate and happens to marry a poor Man is still considered rich while her husband may go to Jail without one farthing of her possessions being responsible for him!'*<sup>1</sup> The property rights of Russian women from both the nobility and merchant class during the 18th and early 19th centuries are widely acknowledged, thanks to the research of scholars such as N. Kozlova, M. Marrese, N. Pushkareva, G. Ulianova, and others. There is still a question regarding the competence of noblewomen in managing their estates and those of their husbands and other absent relatives. Thus, Raeff recognizes that women managed the estates but evaluates women's management negatively. "Long absences [of male landowners], the necessity of relying on hired managers or on womenfolk, led to a decline in the productive capacity of the estates, to the nobleman's impoverishment, and, through the deterioration of the peasant's condition, to an impoverishment of the state's treasury as well".<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the question of how competent noblemen were in this regard wasn't even seriously considered.

Meanwhile, even though we are aware that noblewomen managed their estates, we still lack a clear understanding of the proportion of their property in Russia over time. In 2002, Michelle Marrese complained that *'in the absence of reliable land surveys, probate inventories, or tax returns, determining the actual percentage of real estate in women's hands presents a challenge'*.<sup>3</sup> Since then, historiography on this issue has developed significantly in Russia, and we are in a more favourable position now, I will exploit different types of tax documents to estimate the share of female property in Russia over time.

### What is the wealth of nobility in Russia?

The feature of the Russian story about nobles' wealth is that in pre-industrial times, land was not as central a measure of value as in other European countries. Under serfdom, the wealth of aristocrats in Russia was measured by the number of male serfs possessed basically it was about the labour force which nobleman or noblewoman could obtain.

### Are there any reliable sources of wealth?

The short answer is yes, plenty.

I use three main types of sources: tax lists from censuses (*revizskie skazki*), poll tax registers (*okladnye knigi*) and tax returns of income tax in 1812.

First, tax lists from censuses are used<sup>4</sup>. The report from a taxpayer (an aristocrat) about the number of male serfs (*souls, dushi*) in his or her village was a self-reported document filled in by the owners themselves or by their stewards. This document was not only sent to the local government bodies but was the basic mandatory document for many financial transactions, which could be of huge interest to nobleperson of either gender. Particularly important, this type of document was necessary for purchasing villages, inheriting property and taking out loans. Thus, there were positive incentives for nobles to provide reliable information about the number of serfs<sup>5</sup> and the information about the actual owner in this case. The information provided in

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<sup>1</sup> Wilmot, 1971, p. 234

<sup>2</sup> Raeff, 1966, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Marrese, 2002, p. 119

<sup>4</sup> This source is one of the main sources for historical research in different fields, including economic history, historical demography and family history, but the question about female owners never was of particular interest to historians – partly because the share of the female property remained unknown.

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter I will use the term *serfs*, but it always means only male serfs.

the individual reports was also checked by local officials from time to time. Thus, these documents should be considered as highly reliable.

In Russia, there were ten fiscal registrations of population (*revizia*). I use the data from the first, second, third, fifth, seventh and ninth censuses<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, even though censuses have been widely known in Russia for centuries, we do not have digitalised datasets of censuses of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Every historian must collect data by herself/himself.

Second, poll tax registers at provincial level, identifying individual taxpayers are used. These sources are based on the censuses. Local officials aggregated the information at the district level, retaining the information about the actual owner, the exact settlement, the number of serfs, the dates of paying taxes and arrears if they appeared. These documents were audited by both local and central officials. Thus, the cross-checked combination of two named sources gives us a reliable picture of the wealth of Russian nobility.

Third, income tax returns from 1812 are exploited. They are self-compiled documents about the number of serfs and the obtained annual income in 1811. Income tax was first introduced in Russia in 1812 and revoked in 1819.<sup>7</sup> According to the law, every nobleperson of either gender had to submit a report of his/her 'annual net income' (*deistvitelnyi dokhod*) to the Noble Assemblies of Deputies (*Dvoryanskoe deputatskoe sobranie*). The notion of 'annual net income' implied the consolidated income that a landowner obtained from all of his/her various economic activities,<sup>8</sup> excluding paid interest on loans.<sup>9</sup> Landowners with estates in multiple provinces were required to pay tax in only one province of their choice; however, they also had to inform authorities in the other provinces where they held estates that they would be paying taxes elsewhere. Incomes below 500 rubles were exempt.<sup>10</sup> From 500 rubles to 18,000 rubles, there was a graduated increase in the tax rate, from 1 to 10%. Tax returns had no specific form to fill in, and the provided information varied widely across individuals. A detailed tax return by the widow of lieutenant Daria Alekseevna Kolycheva provides a representative example.

*On the basis of the Highest Manifesto on the 11th day of February of this year, I declare that according to the sixth census I own 739 male serfs in Tula province, 293 male serfs in Kostroma province, and 65 male serfs in Moscow province. I receive an annual income of 6,080 rubles, excluding paid interest on bank loans from The Moscow Orphanage [a bank] and from private individuals. So, I will pay taxes on this income in Moscow province. I will notify the assemblies in other provinces.*<sup>11</sup>

In a nutshell, tax returns are very reliable due to several reasons. They have to provide the information. Third, if nobles did not submit any declarations the value of the taxable income was calculated by their peers, and the absentee would be obliged to pay double the tax rate. The they have to provide accurate. First, a high level of tax compliance was achieved by the threat of public disclosure, whereby nobles had to declare their incomes to their peers. Tax returns were never publicly available for the whole of Russian society but the most significant information from the tax return—the name of the noble and her income—was read out loud in Aristocratic

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<sup>6</sup> The 6th census is traditionally considered incomplete; the 8<sup>th</sup> is skipped to keep roughly 25 years as a unit of analysis.

<sup>7</sup> PSZ RI, I, no. 24992, no. 28028.

<sup>8</sup> These activities were clearly specified: any income from quitrent or corvée (*barschina*), forests, mills, lands, manufactories, excluding mining plants.

<sup>9</sup> PSZ I, no. 24992, § 6.

<sup>10</sup> What does 500 rubles of yearly income mean? Volkov estimated that 300–400 rubles was a sum large enough for a noble family to live according to the standards of noble consumption. Volkov, 'Rossiiskaya imperia'.

<sup>11</sup> TsGA Moskv, f. 4 op. 1 d. 3242. p. 2 – 2ob.

Assembly where 12 elected nobility deputies were present. We know from memoirs that this information about reported income was unofficially circulated in a quite tiny aristocratic society.<sup>12</sup> Second, this circulated information if inaccurate could prevent nobles from getting access to the credit market. For a cohort of those who were on the marriage market at that time inaccurate information could prevent finding the best match. These measures, together with the elites' own vested interest in defending property and social order against Napoleon's attempt to overthrow the social order, ensured compliance.

Using these sources, I analyse how the share of female property changed over time and whether there were any political consequences of female wealth for the governing of the country.

Two preliminary remarks are necessary.

First and foremost, Russia was a constantly expanding territory. For the research of nobility, the study is naturally restricted to European Russia, where the majority of nobles lived; in Siberia, the share of aristocrats was tiny. Land in Siberia belonged to the Emperor and there were almost no serfs. I use data from different regions of European Russia. First, the regions in my sample can be divided into metropolitan (Saint Petersburg and Moscow) and provincial regions (Ryazan, Smolensk, Tambov, Orel). Second, regions vary as old (Ryazan) or relatively new (Smolensk and Tambov) colonised provinces. All these regions always had a high percentage of the noble population, so although I am not covering all districts of European Russia, I provide a representative picture for the majority of nobles.

Second, the study relates to the gender approach to describing women's economic activities in general. I systematically apply the newest approach in gender studies as Danielle van den Heuvel described it. *'The paradigm shift from women to gender is very important in furthering our understanding of how corporate institutions affected pre-industrial societies and the individuals that inhabited them. It has offered room to distinguish between the experiences of men and women...'*<sup>13</sup>. It means that I describe the development of wealth for both women and men, paying attention to the interaction between both genders. From time to time, historians who write about women in Russia (including Marrese) provide information on the other gender – but so far, the analysing of both genders is quite non-systematic.

### *Changes in the share of wealth*

I follow the standard way of measuring wealth via the number of male serfs. My focus is on the wealth of Russian noblepersons as individuals, rather than as a family unit. So, my approach differs from mainstream historical research. The standard approach in Russia, reflected in my conversation with my colleague, is to treat the property of spouses as either a joint property—with only husbands' names mentioned—or as a property of an extended family/clan which belongs to the most famous male member of the family. However, starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the law gave equal ownership rights to male and female aristocrats <sup>14</sup>, so it is a mistake to include female property in the property of a family by default.

#### *The gender balance in wealth in the 1720s*

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<sup>12</sup> For detailed discussion see Korchmina, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Heuvel, 2013.

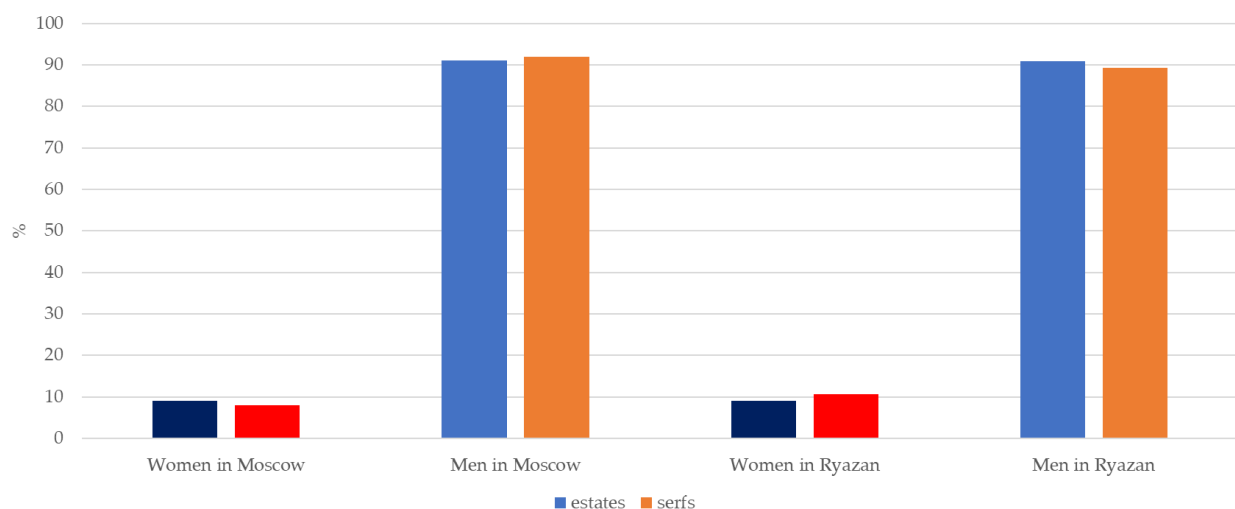
<sup>14</sup> PSZ I vol 5 article 2952, p. 181

The law confirming the rights of women to sell and buy property under their own names was issued in 1715<sup>15</sup>. The first census started in 1718 and lasted till 1725, so if we accept 1725 as the year of the census, we could not expect that a lot of women got the opportunity to implement the new rule. The first snapshot of the wealth in 1725 should be considered as the result of the intersection of formal and informal rules, and as a baseline for our estimation.

For the first census, I use data on the Pereslavl Ryazan<sup>16</sup> and Moscow districts (*uezd*) in the Moscow province (*gubernia*)<sup>17</sup>. The data for the Moscow district were collected and published by Sergei Chernikov, who used recruits' registers of 1737 with the data of the first census on the number of serfs in possession of every aristocrat. The data for Ryazan district is collected by me from the archival census documents and has been checked with registers of the poll tax.<sup>18</sup>

In 1725, around 10% of all estates and all serfs on the territory under consideration belonged to women. In the Moscow district, whose population totalled around 150,000 people, in 1724, female aristocrats owned 9% of all landed estates and 8% of male serfs<sup>19</sup>. In Ryazan district, the total population of which was around 110,000 people, the share of female noble owners was the same, but on average, noblewomen were slightly richer; they owned 48 serfs as compared to 40 serfs for noblemen (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The distribution of landowners by gender in the 1720s.



Source: Chernikov, RGADA. F. 350. op. 2. part. 2 d. 2607; f. 273. op. 1. d. 32568.

Thus, female aristocrats owned 10% of landed property within Moscow and Ryazan districts, which together comprised 260,000 people. 186 noblewomen owned more than 25,000 serfs. However, this is merely a baseline because the law was introduced only 10 years before the time of the census.

<sup>15</sup> PSZ I vol 5 article 2952, p. 181

<sup>16</sup> Administrative borders of provinces changed, so it is very difficult to compare directly the Ryazan district in the first half of the 18th century with the Ryazan district after Catherine II's administrative reforms. In the rest of the text, the Pereslavl Ryazan district will be called Ryazan

<sup>17</sup> Peter the Great established 8 provinces and 39 districts on the territory of Russia.

<sup>18</sup> There is a small difference between census lists, Chernikov's source, as an aggregated source, and the original census, as my source. Censuses provide detailed information about each property in a district; thus, if a woman owned four different villages, it will be counted as four different estates, although in Chernikov's source, it will be one property per district per person. So, for comparison purposes, I aggregated my data.

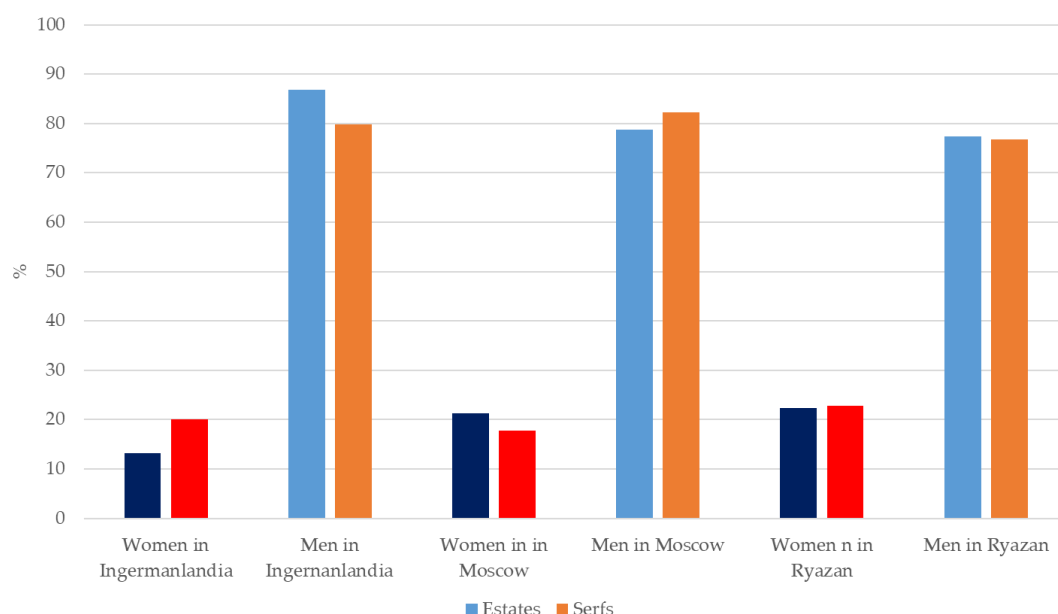
<sup>19</sup> Chernikov, 2012.

### *The gender balance in wealth in the 1740s*

In the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we observe a rapid increase in the share of property owned by women. In 1743, by the time of the second census, their share had increased to 21% for a bigger territory: the Moscow and Ryazan districts, and the Saint Petersburg province (four districts). Due to the addition of four districts, the regional variation is more striking.

Thus, in newly attached territories, Ingermanlandia, in 1743, the share of female estates was 13%, but the share of owned serfs was 20%. Women were considerably richer in Saint Petersburg province than both men in the same province and women in the old territories of core Russia, such as Moscow and Ryazan.

Figure 2. The distribution of landowners by gender in 1742/1743.



Source Chernikov, 2012. RGADA, f. 273, op. 1, d. 32590.

In Moscow district, we observe a rapid increase in the share of the female property: it doubled compared with 1725 and reached 21%. The situation in Ryazan district was similar in terms of shares both of estates and serfs; again roughly 20% of property was in female hands. In 1744, the male serf population was 4.3 million people, so female aristocrats possessed roughly one million serfs<sup>20</sup>.

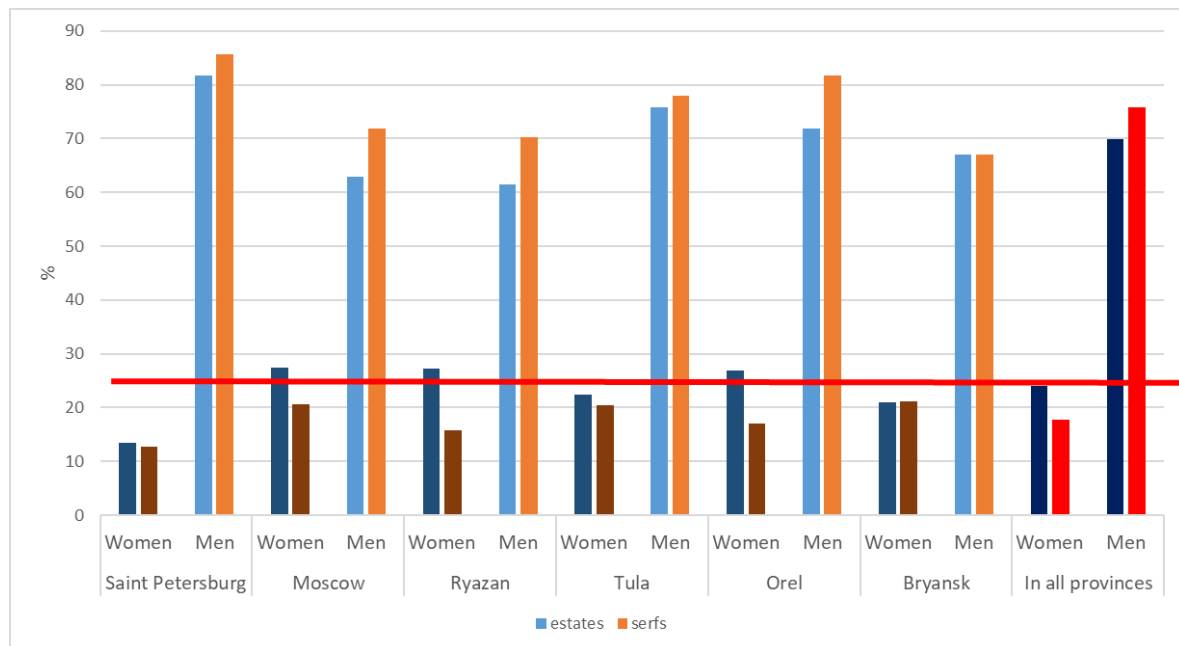
Still, it is important to remember that an owner in one province could have property in another province. So, to avoid double counting, I matched nobles from all three regions in quite a conservative way: If there was a total coincidence in surnames, names, patronymic names and ranks, these people were matched as one owner. The number of individual owners decreased by almost 20% under this procedure. However, the share of female property remained the same. Further, the nobles of either gender became 20% 'richer', and women and men were almost equal in terms of wealth – on average, they owned 70 serfs.

### *The gender balance in wealth in the 1760s and the 1770s*

<sup>20</sup> Kahan, 1985, p. 24

For the 1760s, more data were available, so I keep looking at the Moscow and Ryazan districts of the Moscow and Saint-Petersburg provinces, but while also adding data from Tula, Orel, and Bryansk districts. The Bryansk district reflects the situation at the frontier. The share of female possession in the border provinces should arguably be lower because of constant military threat, but as we can see, this is not the case. In every Russian district explored, the share of female estates was significant and kept growing, although the total number of serfs in female possession did not increase accordingly (23%).

Figure 3. The distribution of landowners by gender in the 1760s.



Source: Chernikov, 2012, RGADA, f. 248, op. 117, d. 1464, op. 109, d. 158, f. 350, op. 2, d. 1259.<sup>21</sup>

The regional variation is significant. In Saint Petersburg, the share of female property remained unchanged. Potentially gender disbalance was caused by the capital status of Saint Petersburg: a capital region that attracted more men than women in general. The share of female owners in 'serfdom' provinces – Moscow, Tula, Ryazan, Orel and Bryansk – was significantly higher, but they were significantly poorer. Moscow, Ryazan, and Orel were the leading regions in terms of female possession; here, the share of female property was closer to 30%.

Marrese published some information about other districts in Russia, using the General Land Survey (*Generalnoe mezhevoe opisanie*) as a source. Thus, in 1775 in the Vladimir province, 33% of the estates were in female hands. In Kashin, in 1776, 41% of estates were in female hands.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the share of female owners kept increasing, yet unevenly. In serfdom provinces, the growth was higher than in Saint Petersburg. Nina Shepukova and Vasili Semevskii identify that at the time under consideration, "in fifty years the number of medium and large landowners has almost doubled, and the share of small landowners decreased by 6.8%."<sup>23</sup> Basically, it could mean that the women not only became owners more often but also became richer.

<sup>21</sup> Red horizontal line identifies the average number of female estates in the sample.

<sup>22</sup> Marrese, 2002, p. 120

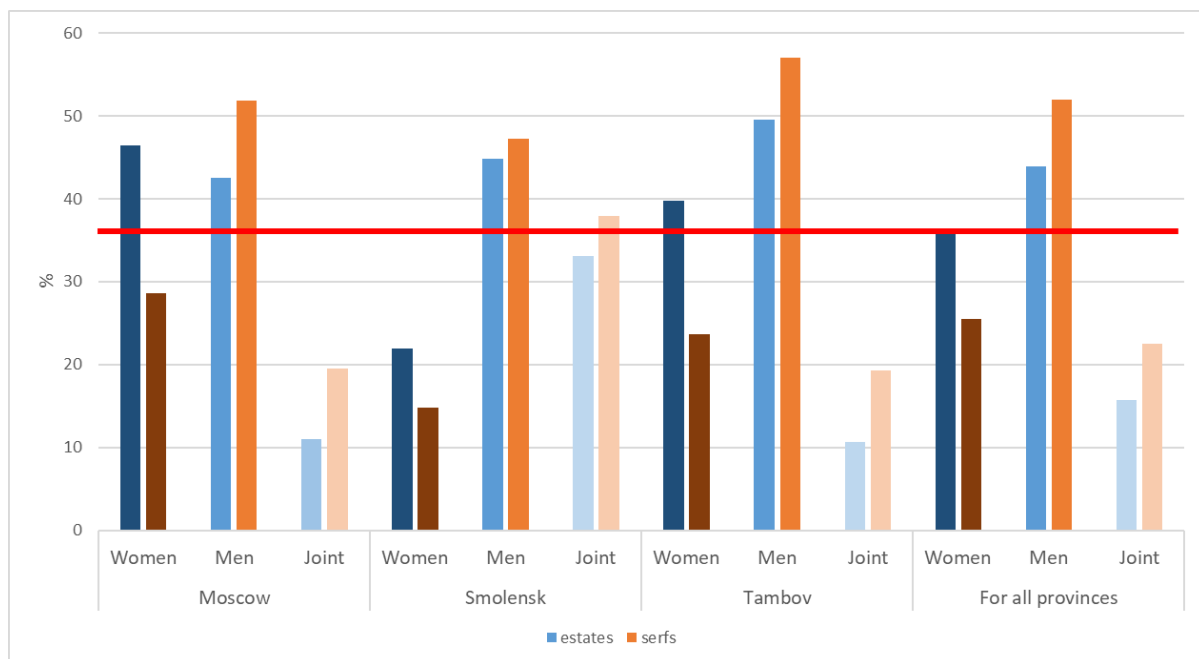
<sup>23</sup> Faizova, 1999, p. 50



### *The gender balance in wealth in the 1790s – 1810s.*

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the share of female owners grew slightly to around 35%. The status quo for the period is described using tax returns from income tax. The regional variation is even more striking. The share of female owners in Smolensk was twice as low compared to Moscow and Tambov. In Moscow, the number of female landowners was even higher than male ones. Men in all three provinces were richer than women. The poorest women lived in Tambov at that time.

Figure 4. The distribution of landowners by gender in 1811



Sources: GASO, f. 6, op. 1, d. 3, GATO, f. 161, op. 1, d. 1422, 1423, 1429, 1430, 1432, 1433, 1438, 1439, 1440, TsGA Moskv, f. 4, op. 1, d. 3225, 3226, 3227, 3228, 3229, 3230, 3231, 3232, 3233, 3234, 3235, 3236, 3237, 3238, 3239, 3241, 3242, 3243, 3244, 3245, 3246, 3247, 3248

The fifth census shows that the share of property owned by female aristocrats kept growing. With joint possession (where a woman was the head of a joint household), the share of property owned by noblewomen in the main serfdom provinces reached almost 45%. This means that one hundred years after the 1715 law gave nobility the right to manage their estates under their own names, the share of property in female hands had scaled up massively.

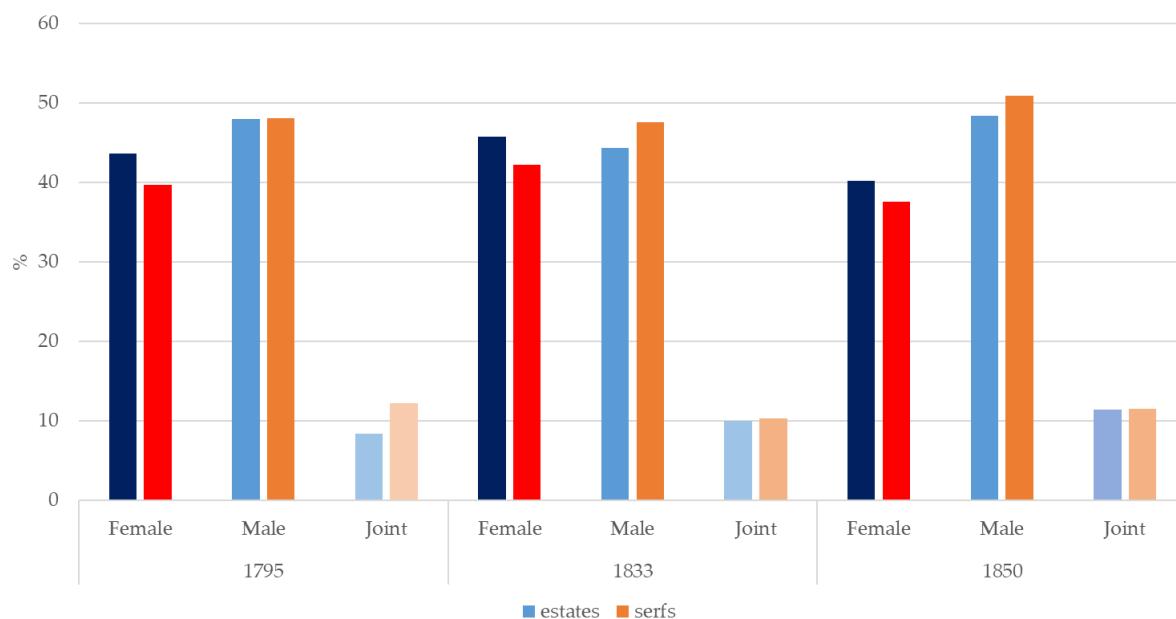
It is important to underline that in my data for the 1800s, the percentage of joint estates was significant. Almost all joint ownerships were trusteeships after the death of a parent or a spouse. After identification the sex of the person who either submitted the tax return or was listed as the first owner, the proportion of male and female owners remains the same. The share of trusteeships where women were listed as the principal or the first owner was 25%. I believe that a significant share of joint estates could be considered the turning point in the story of female ownership, as joint ownership is a frontier situation. If women still wanted to be owners they could 'fight' for their shares of property, or they could give up on it and voluntarily hand over the rights to the landed property either to their husbands or sons. Who will win the property right over the land and serfs?

### *The gender balance of wealth during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

To trace the changes in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I look at individual-level data in one of the noncapital regions. Ryazan province is a good example because it had a high share of nobles and a serf population. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the share of female property kept increasing and ultimately reached 40%. The share was the same for Moscow, Tambov, and Smolensk, so this province was quite representative. Thus, I believe analysing the case of this province will reflect the situation in Russia more generally.

Figure 5 demonstrates that the share of female possession reached around 40%, then froze and started to decline slightly. In terms of the average number of serfs per estate, both women and men became 1.5 times richer compared with the beginning of the century.

Figure 5. The structure of property in Ryazan and Rannenburg districts in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Sources: GARO, f. 129. op. 32. d-ds. 115, 112, 113, 114, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 143. sv. 527, 139. sv. 523, 140. sv. 524, 141, 142, 144. sv. 528; op. 46. d-ds 146, 133, 142, 144, 145, 147, 162. sv. 690, 167, 170. sv. 693, 171. sv. 694, op. 7. d-ds 60, 63, 76. sv. 139, 77 sv. 140, 78. sv 141, 79. sv. 142, 80. sv. 143, 58, 59, 61 a, 61, 62.

So, the first conclusion based on analysing the share of female property across different Russian regions is that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the share of female estates increases by four, from 10% to 40%, then freezes and starts declining slowly. I will show later that the share of women among the top landowners kept falling till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, during the 18<sup>th</sup>-century the share of estates owned by noblemen fell dramatically. Does it mean that in terms of wealth, a limit was reached at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century? Or were there other mechanisms? Let us investigate how the property was transferred to women.

### How was the property transferred?

The ways to obtain the property were standard at that time and did not differ much from earlier or later periods. Property was primarily transferred through inheritance and purchase. Obtaining property via auction upon failure to pay one's debts or dowry was not that common. The only specific way which characterised mainly the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was property granted by the Empress or Emperor. During the time of Catherine the Great and Paul I,

favourites, mainly men, received more than 385 thousand serfs<sup>24</sup> in total—almost 4% of the serf population in 1795. This imperial largesse was unequally divided between people, as Dominic Lieven noticed.<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that none of these fortunes were bestowed upon female hands. Thus, Catherine Dashkova, who helped Catherine the Great to come into power, received only 24,000 roubles, and she was decorated with a Saint Catherine medal and some not very fertile lands. Anna Protasova, who was Catherine's favourite, received only 100 serfs from Paul I. It is remarkable that female favourites received neither lands nor serfs from emperors and empresses.

This part of the text is devoted to the 'standard' practices of obtaining property, using data from the Ryazan district. As previously mentioned, it is a good choice because of its, to some extent, peripheral status. The 1700s was a starting point. *'In Ryazan from 1706 to 1711, women do not appear to have been either sellers or purchasers of an estate'*.<sup>26</sup> The situation in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century will be analysed based on the data on transferring property from the first to the second censuses (the 1720s–1740s). The question that we bear in mind is how it came about that the share of female owners doubled within two decades. The sample contains information about 300 estates (20% of all estates in the Ryazan district). I managed to match 300 estates for which the information about how exactly the estate was obtained was available (Table 1).

Table 1. How did nobles obtain property? (the shares of obtained estates and serfs)

	Inheritance		Loan		Purchase		Same owner		Transferred		Total
	<i>estates</i>	<i>serfs</i>	<i>estates</i>	<i>serfs</i>	<i>estates</i>	<i>serfs</i>	<i>estates</i>	<i>serfs</i>	<i>estates</i>	<i>serfs</i>	
Women	79.41	88.13	1.47	2.59	14.71	7.96	2.94	1.21	1.47	0.12	100
Men	51.29	43.79	0.43	0.05	11.64	3.54	34.91	49.31	1.72	3.31	100
Total	57.67	56.22	0.67	0.76	12.33	4.78	27.67	35.83	1.67	2.42	100

Source: RGADA, f. 350, op. 2, d. 2611. our calculations.

For both men and women, the principal way of receiving an estate was by inheritance, although for men, only 50% of property was obtained this way; for women it was almost 80%. On the one hand, it is not surprising that inheritance was the principal way for women to obtain property, because inheriting the estate after the death of a relative is a natural way to improve one's financial status. On the other hand, it is quite surprising how often women were made heirs. It means that even at that time, women were already considered decent heirs/owners. Analysing the share of inherited serfs, women received bigger estates than men on average. What is more interesting is that women were half as active in purchasing property than men. Among all women who became new owners of estates at that time, purchasing was the second-most popular way to increase their wealth. It is also quite surprising that the persistence of owning the same estate was significantly higher for men (80 cases for men vs. only two cases for women). 30% of male owners owned the same property for more than 20 years, as opposed to just 3% of female owners. best way to understand the role of women in the established image of property rights is to dig deeper into the choice of heir.

Table 2. Noblemen and noblewomen as heirs in the 1730s-1740s (%).

from	Brother	Father	Husband	Mother	Non-relative	Wife	Not identified
Women	1.9	13.0	85.2				

<sup>24</sup> Blum, 1961, p. 357

<sup>25</sup> Lieven, 1992, p. 37

<sup>26</sup> Marrese, 2002, p. 106

Men	1.0	84.8		1.7	1.7	9.3	1.7
Total	1.2	61.2	26.7	1.2	1.2	6.4	1.2

Source: RGADA, f. 350, op. 2, d. 2611. our calculations.

Most of the women received their estates from their husbands, although a small proportion of men obtained their estates from their wives. Interestingly, men mainly received their estates from their fathers, and sometimes from their mothers. Still, most of the women did not inherit their fathers' or mothers' estates. This could be explained by the fact that women could receive some estates as dowries.

Why did men start to choose women as heirs more often? The legal framework gave nobles the freedom to make anyone their heir. This meant nobles could either stick to the notion that women are unsuitable heirs or they could change their preferences. They chose the latter and started to seek just a suitable heir of either gender, as is evident from the statement of Dmitrov<sup>27</sup> nobles in the 1760s. This statement, like many others, appeared thanks to Catherine the Great, who asked nobles to write a petition about their needs. Among others, the Dmitrov nobility asked Her Majesty for a law that granted every nobleman full power over his estate—allowing each nobleman to bequeath his estate to anyone he pleases, without limits – either of his children, his wife, relatives or a non-relative of either sex.

*'How totally happy any Russian nobleman can then be called, when, he will be powerful to reward only those of his children, relatives, and strangers, whom he will judge worthy of his assistance, and whom he will find capable of owning a property! Now, parents often look with sorrow at their poor daughters. The father, having one daughter and one son, is forced to leave his property to his son, sometimes unworthy, in abundance with thirteen shares of his property, and his daughter has left in poverty with a fourteenth share'*<sup>28</sup>.

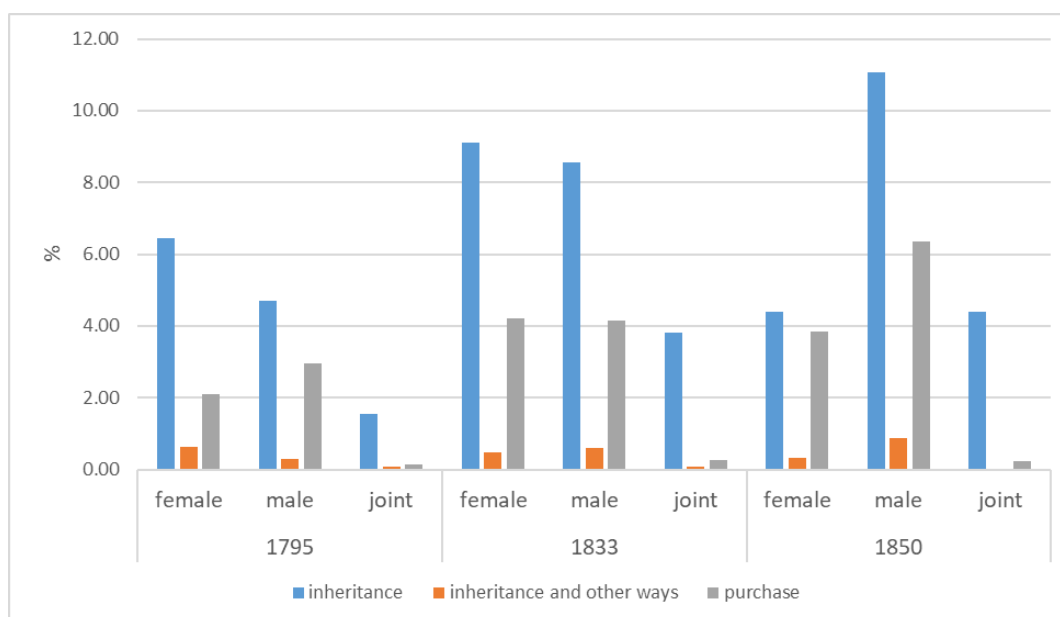
This goes to show that owners were more interested in finding a capable person of either sex rather than just a male relative.

For the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I have data for the same number of estates as before in the same Ryazan district, and it seems that overall, economic activity saw a slight decrease. For a lot of estates, the owner remained the same from census to census. The share of women who were involved in economic activity dropped significantly, which is surprising, especially since the share of estates in female hands was almost equal to the share of male estates. This suggests that the result of the decreased female economic activity saw a slight decline in property owned by women.

Figure 6. The ways of obtaining property in Ryazan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>27</sup> Dmitrov was one of the districts in the Moscow province. It had the same status as the Ryazan district at that time.

<sup>28</sup> SIRIO, vol. 8, p. 508. Thanks to Viktor Borisov for sharing this reference with me.



Source: See Figure 5.

Inheritance remained one of the principal ways of obtaining property. At the same time, from 1833 to 1850, the trajectory changed, and women not only inherited less property; they became less active in terms of buying property. Does this mean, then, that women were prevented from being considered honorable owners and heirs or were there economic reasons for such a decrease? I already mentioned that on average, women were poorer than men. It could be that due to having fewer financial means, they were gradually losing their economic opportunities. In the next section, I will dig deeper into the volume of wealth in women's hands and the level of inequality that could affect their capacity to buy and inherit property.

## Inequality

The stylised image of wealth inequality among nobles could be expressed by the statement by Lieven for the 1850s. *'This [inequality within the Russian aristocrats] is a far greater degree of inequality within the aristocratic elite than one would find in the mid-nineteenth century in either England or Germany'*<sup>29</sup>. Contemporary nobles also highlighted the dire financial status of Russian nobles. Thus, *'in 1847, the Ryazan marshal of the nobility, Redkin, presented the proposal of the need to provide some kind of assistance to the poor nobles of the Ryazan province, many of whom fell into dire need. Their disasters reached the point that some of the nobles were forced to be employed in the services of their own serfs'*<sup>30</sup>. I suggest applying a systematic approach to estimate the level of inequality and gender gap within the elite, because based on collected anecdotal evidence, inequality definitely plays a major part.

There are two standard approaches to measuring inequality within Russian nobles:

The first approach is a traditional historical one based on the division of nobles into different groups by the number of possessed male serfs. Thus, the nobles are usually divided into three categories (poor, middle-class and rich). The exact thresholds between the three categories could vary. But most of the time, historians identify those who had either less than 20 serfs or less than 100 serfs, as "poor". Many papers apply this approach.<sup>31</sup> The main problem of this

<sup>29</sup> Lieven, 1992 p. 42

<sup>30</sup> Boretskiy, 1882, p. 341

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Kahan, 1966.

perspective is that the estimations are based on the census, but the census provided data on the size of an estate rather than the wealth of nobles. If a noblewoman had two estates in two different districts, she would be counted twice in the aggregated registers of censuses and as a result in historical papers, but she would be also twice as poor. So basically, all works so far did not measure the wealth of nobles. I apply this approach, but I use the better data derived from the tax returns of 1812. It means that a unit of observation is not an estate but a nobleperson of either gender with all their estates. This better data also means that my results will differ from those commonly seen in historiography.

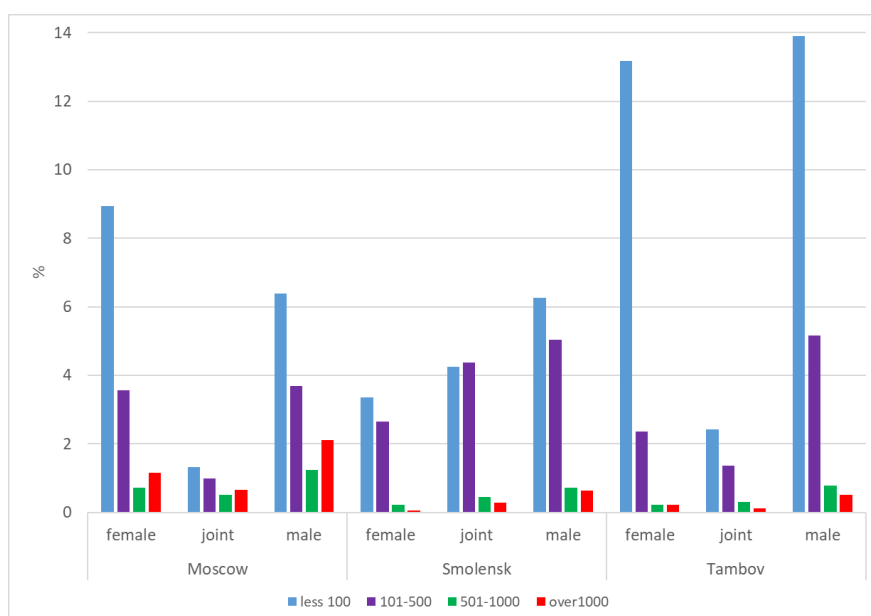
The second approach, estimating a Gini coefficient, is used quite rarely. Usually, authors just provide Gini coefficients without digging deeper into their methodology or data<sup>32</sup>. My main criticism of this type of research is the same as before: scholars using censuses capture land inequality rather than wealth. I calculate Gini using my dataset, which avoids this problem.

For the first time for pre-industrial Eastern Europe, I measure the gender gap both for wealth and income. This is possible due to the unique data I have collected. My estimations refer to the 1810s, the period in which income tax returns exist. Without these returns, the exercise would not have been possible.

### *Wealth inequality*

The first approach to measure gender inequality is the traditional historical one. I divide nobles into four categories based on the number of serfs: poor (possessed less than 100 serfs), two groups in the middle class (possessed from 101 to 500 and 501 to 1,000 serfs, respectively), and rich nobles of both genders (Figure 7)<sup>33</sup>. At that time, the majority of nobles (60%) had less than 100 serfs, but the average numbers vary significantly across different regions.

Figure 7. The distribution of nobles by wealth in Moscow, Smolensk, and Tambov in the 1810s.



Source: See Figure 4.

Tambov had overall inequality. It was the poorest province. Although, the share of female owners in Tambov was quite high (almost 40%), but they were five times poorer on average.

<sup>32</sup> Mironov, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion on the threshold line for different groups of nobles, see Faisova, 1999, p. 50.

Moscow was the most gender-equal region with a share of property owned by women of more than 50%. However, the share of poor noblewomen in the Moscow region was fairly high. Moscow noblemen were the richest among all provinces. The Smolensk province was somewhere between Moscow and Tambov. The share of female aristocrats in Smolensk was significantly lower and they were twice as poor as Moscow noblewomen. All in all, the regional variation of inequality by gender was huge.

These numbers are partly confirmed by Martha Wilmot's observations. She visited Smolensk on 26 September 1804. She wrote in her diary,

*'I find that there is less of the fire and fume of good education amongst the damsels of Smolensky than amongst the Muscovites who bewilder you to shew off their 4 or 5 languages, their musical ability and their profound knowledge of the great science of dancing. The Smolenskovites are consequently less affected and I am tempted to add better bred, as a tincture of diffidence is at least mingled with the fearless inquisitive fatiguing manner of half the fair damsels of my acquaintance at Moscow.'*<sup>34</sup>

By estimating the Gini coefficient, regional elite inequality was 0.68 in Moscow, 0.65 in Tambov and 0.56 in Smolensk. Moscow province was the most unequal, although gender balanced. Tambov province differed little from Moscow province and it was relatively gender balanced, too. The most equal province in terms of wealth was Smolensk, which at the same time was more gender imbalanced. As expected, given the difference in data sources, my results are much lower than the established ones in historiography. For example, Boris Mironov estimated Gini as 0.74 in 1678, 0.67 in 1727, 0.72 in 1777, and 0.75 in 1833 and 0.71 in 1858.<sup>35</sup> My estimations are closer to the observation of the contemporary statistician Karl German, who wrote in 1819 that the Russian nobility was more homogeneous, equal, than the Polish (meaning the Polish Lithuanian nobility in the annexed territories). *'The Russian nobility is smaller than the Polish but stronger in its wealth, divided with greater equality between its members'*.<sup>36</sup> Thus, elite inequality of the Russian nobility was lower than suggested by earlier scholars but still relatively high. That being said, this number is still somewhat 'blind' because it does not tackle the issue of the ratio between female and male property.

#### *Wealth and income gender gaps in pre-industrial Russia*

Measuring the wealth and income gender gaps for a pre-industrial society is something really new, mainly because estimating women's – even noblewomen's – wealth and income is quite a challenge for that period of time, because elite women in many Western European countries did not have property rights to the extent that women did in Russia.

I follow the definition of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and apply the standard measure wealth (income) gender gap as the difference between average wealth (income) of women as a percentage of average wealth (income) of men.

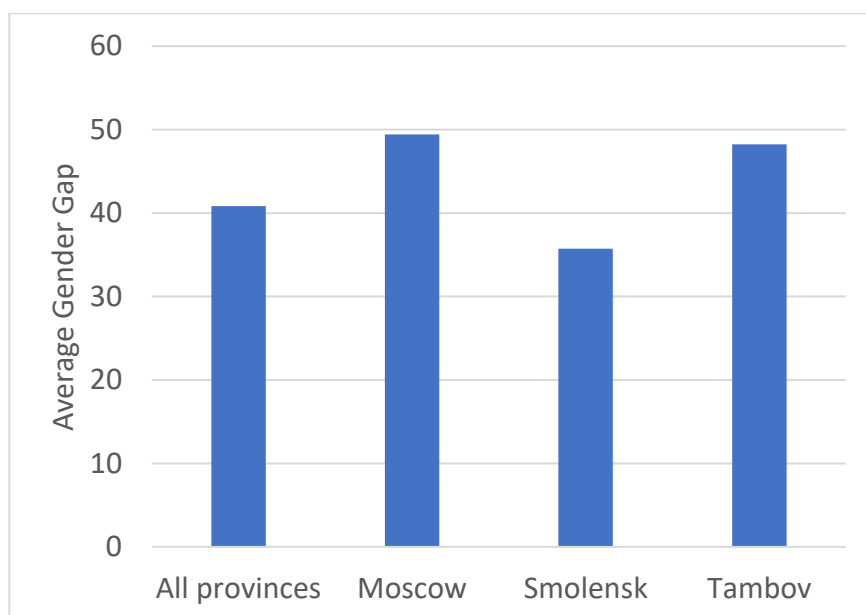
Figure 8. The unadjusted gender wealth gap in the 1810s (for individuals).

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<sup>34</sup> Wilmot, 1971, p. 130

<sup>35</sup> Mironov, 2003, p. 93

<sup>36</sup> German, 1819



Source: See Figure 4.

Figure 8 shows the pattern of gender inequality across the provinces was somewhat inconsistent, with Smolensk case a clear outlier. I will discuss potential reasons later.

Who were the richest people in any province: men or women? The default guess would normally be a man, but in Moscow, it was an unmarried woman: Anna Orlova, the daughter of an ex-lover of Catherine the Great. According to rumours, *'Countess Anne Orloff's Fortune is enormous. Her annual income is 300,000 roubles a year (40,000 pounds) besides which her property in diamonds, pearls and all sort of valuables is incalculable'*.<sup>37</sup> But thanks to new sources, I can tell that her annual income was 500,000 roubles.<sup>38</sup> The subsistence basket calculated by Robert Allen's approach is around 40 roubles per household.<sup>39</sup> This means that Anna Orlova received 12 thousand times more money per year than an average peasant family in Moscow at that time. Iankova in her memoirs mentioned that Bershovy in Tambov province were quite poor, his mother used to do everything by herself and did not differ much from *odnodvortsy*. They were cultivating land by their own<sup>40</sup>. And from tax returns I know that they were earning around 300 roubles in 1811.<sup>41</sup>

Table 3. The share of male and female nobles in the top and bottom 10% of the sample according to their wealth.

	Number of people in the top 10%	Share of women in the top 10%	No. of male serfs in the top 10%	Share of accumulated wealth in female hands	No. of people in the bottom 10%	Share of women in the bottom 10%	No. of serfs in the bottom 10%	Share of wealth accumulated by women
Smolensk	70	11.43	23,435	12.98	70	22.86	1,122	24.42
Tambov	134	12.69	93,230	15.04	134	48.51	423	49.65
Moscow	158	32.91	552,578	23.48	158	54.43	1,553	55.57

<sup>37</sup> Wilmot, 1971, p. 315

<sup>38</sup> TsGA Mosckvy.

<sup>39</sup> Korchmina, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Blagovo, 2022. <https://azbyka.ru/fiction/rasskazy-babushki-iz-vospominanij-5-pokolenij-zapisannye-i-sobrannye-eyo-nukom-blagovo/6/>

<sup>41</sup> GATO, f. 161, op. 1 d. 1440



	386	27.46	819,615	22.43	386	52.33	2,388	52.51
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Source: See Figure 4.

In the top 10% of serf owners, the share of women varied, from 11-12% in Smolensk and Tambov to 33% in Moscow. Noblewomen in Smolensk and Tambov accumulated 13-15% of the wealth, so they could be slightly richer than men, but women in Moscow were significantly poorer than men because they had only 24% of male serfs in their possession, but richer than their sisters in Smolensk and Tambov.

For the bottom 10%, half of the serf owners were women in Tambov and Moscow, and 20% in Smolensk. So, for Smolensk, the share of women was the same across the different economic strata. In Moscow and Tambov, the distribution was disproportionate towards the bottom strata.

My argument about the decrease of wealth in female hands during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is confirmed for the top serf-owners. Marrese noticed the same pattern using data on land purchases, but never elaborated on this idea. *'The relative wealth of men and women, if estimated by the value of estates sold, fluctuated over time, moving slightly in men's favour in 1775-80, then more dramatically so – particularly in Moscow – on the eve of Emancipation'*.<sup>42</sup> We can put these estimations of the share of female owners in perspective using later data from Lieven. In 1859, among all the richest serf owners in Russia, 16 out of 63 owners were women (25%)<sup>43</sup>, which is consistent with my data. In 1900, using the data by Minarik, we see that out of 42 owners of more than 100,000 desyatina<sup>44</sup>, there were only 5 women (12%).<sup>45</sup> Among 45 owners of 50-100,000 desyatina, there were only 3 women, and 7 owners were husband and wife, but the names of women were not even listed.<sup>46</sup> So during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the decrease of female property in the top strata of Russian nobility fell to the level of the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

To further corroborate these results, we should check how wealth and rank are linked. In Russia, the social, material and symbolic level of officials could be easily measured by the so-called Table of Ranks, which was introduced by Peter the Great. According to the Table of Ranks, the first rank was the highest and the 14<sup>th</sup> was the lowest. In the case of Russia, it makes a lot of sense to compare the ranks of men and women because when a noblewoman married, she obtained the rank of her husband. One's salary and access to different material opportunities were based on one's rank. *'If a Man does not serve to obtain a rank, he may possess Millions but he will not have it in his power to put 4 horses to his Carriage'*.<sup>47</sup> So, the higher the rank of a nobleman is traditionally associated with possessing more property. Moscow as a capital city could attract more high-ranked officials.

Table 5. The ranks of noblewomen and noblemen in top 10% and bottom 10% wealth categories.

	For the province		top 10			bottom 10		
	Average rank for men	Average rank for women	Average rank for men	Average rank for women	Share of single women	Average rank for men	Average rank for women	Share of single women
Smolensk	10.40	9.90	10.37	8.50	0.00	11.23	11.38	0.00
Tambov	10.24	10.53	7.60	6.10	0.00	11.94	11.80	24.62

<sup>42</sup> Marrese, 2022, p. 121

<sup>43</sup> Lieven, 1992, p. 44-45

<sup>44</sup> 1 desyatina = 10,926.512 m<sup>2</sup> (1.09 hectare)

<sup>45</sup> Lieven, 1992, p. 49

<sup>46</sup> Lieven, 1992, p. 50

<sup>47</sup> Wilmot, 1971, p. 299

Moscow	7.90	7.40	5.70	4.34	11.54	9.10	9.65	43.02
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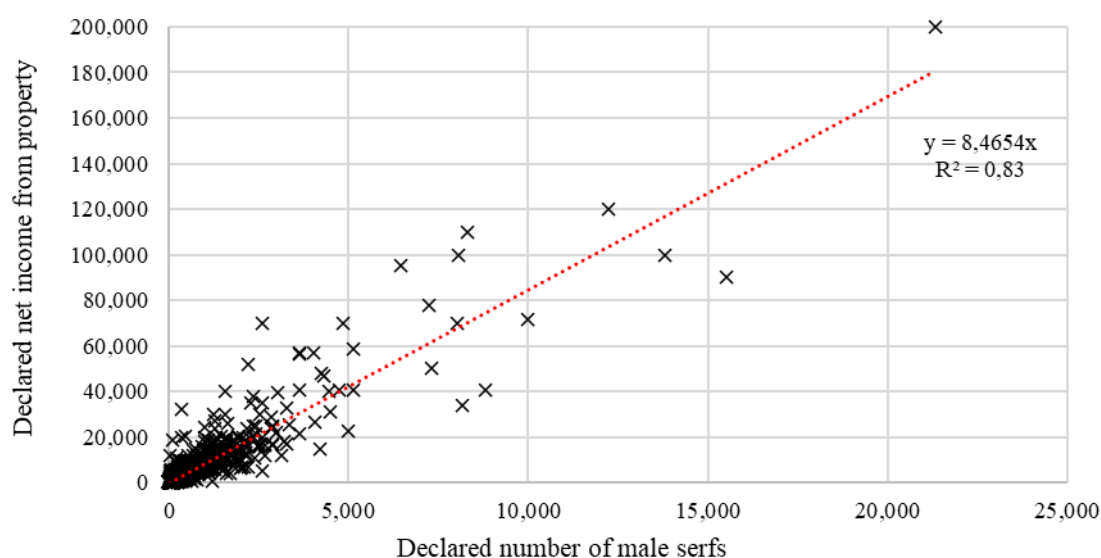
Source: see figure 4.

According to Table 5, regional variation was significant. The average rank across provinces was 10 (collegiate secretary (*kollezhskii sekratar'*) or staff captain (*shtabs capitan*)). As expected, two faraway Moscow provinces, Smolensk and Tambov, had the same patterns of recruiting officials. The officials there had ranks closer to the averages. In Moscow, officials in higher ranks dominated (mayors and collegiate assessors (*kollezhskii assessor*)). For all three provinces, the rank of women in the top cohort was higher than for men. For the bottom cohort, the ranks were the same as averages across provinces or lower. Therefore, we observe high inequality. In the top 10%, the share of unmarried women who could obtain property from either their relatives or buy it themselves was really low – from 0 to 10%. But in the bottom 10%, the share of unmarried women was significant: in Moscow, 40% of the poorest female serf owners were unmarried women.

To better understand the economic status of women compared to men at the moment when they reached the peak of their economic power in the Empire, which I describe as the combination of the maximum share of property on female hands and the maximum average number of serfs on their hands in comparison with noblemen, I look more carefully at the income situation.

We know that the number of serfs in one's possession was strongly correlated with incomes, and we have information about both parameters. But as you can see in the figure, the dispersion at the top level of the nobility was significant.

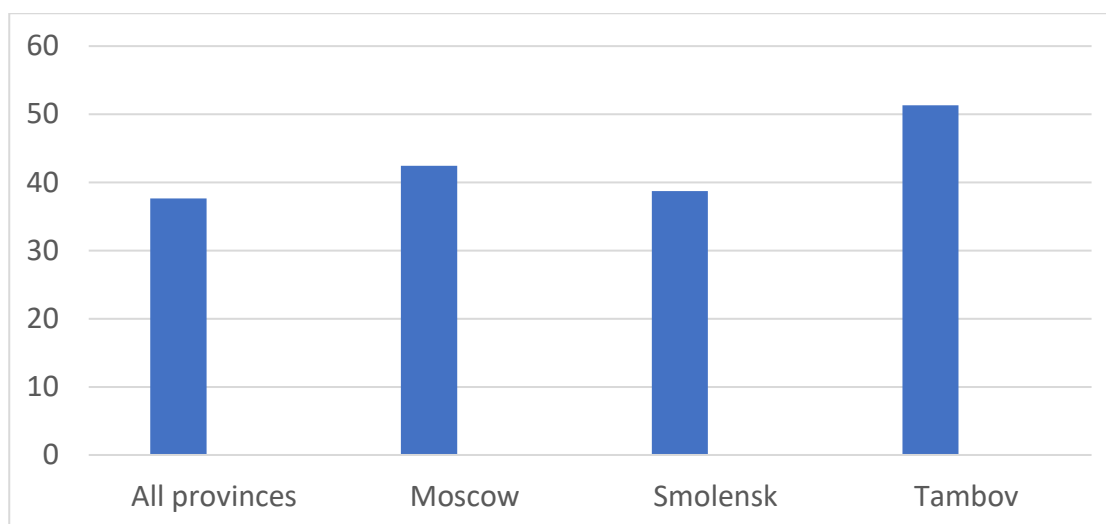
Figure 9. Scatter plot of male serfs possessed and rouble income.



Source: Korchmina and Malinowski (2023)

In my dataset there are more observations for incomes rather than for serf holdings.

Figure 10. The unadjusted gender income gap in the 1810s (for individuals).



Source: See Figure 4.

To provide an understanding of what these roubles mean, I can give an estimation from Martha Wilmot: *“She says she [Countess Irene Woronzow] has an annual income of 100,000 roubles (which is at very low calculation 12,000 pounds a year, but here it may be valued, taking into Calculation the different value of things and particularly servants and labour which to Russian Landholders is a mere trifle, at 20,000 pounds).<sup>48</sup>* Alexander Martin shows that the minimum annual expenses for a noble family of four people in Moscow at that time were around 500-800 roubles.<sup>49</sup>

As we can see in Figure 8 and 10, the income gender gap is lower than the wealth gender gap. I have an explanation that I shall elaborate on in later. I assume that even though men had more property and were richer, women managed their property more efficiently: The income per serf from women’s property was slightly higher than that from men’s property.

Table 6. The share of noblewomen in the top and bottom 10% of the sample (income).

	Earned income (roubles)	Number of people in the top 10%	Share of women in the top 10%	Earned income by the top 10% (roubles)	Share of earned income by women	How many people in the bottom 10%	Share of women in the bottom 10%	Earned income by the bottom 10% (roubles)	Share of earned income by women
Smolensk	2,608,339	105	13.33	1,265,687	8.07	105	21.90	52,250	20.57
Tambov	1,637,078	138	16.67	869,882	18.04	138	54.35	4,940	59.17
Moscow	15,307,521	304	30.92	9,143,630	26.12	304	53.95	22,945	59.49

Source: See Figure 4.

The comparison of the result between wealth and income for the top and bottom 10%, respectively, does not differ much, but as usual, Smolensk differs a lot from Tambov and Moscow provinces.

Thus, we see that the amount of wealth accumulated in the hands of women was significant, and in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was close to 50% across Russia. We also see that regional

<sup>48</sup> Wilmot, 1971, p. 304

<sup>49</sup> Martin, 2007, p. 440

variation was huge, and the gender gap in Smolensk province was much smaller compared with serfdom provinces such as Moscow and Tambov.

As previously demonstrated, Smolensk is quite an outlier in my estimations. My explanation for this is based on path dependence and natural resources. First, we should compare Smolensk and Tambov, both of which were incorporated quite late into the Russian Empire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: in 1653 and 1636, respectively. Smolensk was conquered by Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich from Poland, and to provide the loyalty of the local elites, the Smolensk nobility received confirmation about their independent status compared to the Russian nobility. These privileges related to different spheres. First, Smolensk nobles had more security in their property rights than Russian nobles because the security of estates and lands were guaranteed by the Tsar of Russia.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Smolensk nobility received favourable rights to buy land within the region. Second, even during the time of Peter the Great, the Smolensk nobility was allowed to wear traditional Polish dress. Smolensk nobles tried to send their children to Poland to school although it was not easy. Third, the principle of Table of Ranks was not totally implemented in Smolensk. The promotion in the army was based on aristocratic privilege rather than merit. Thus, we see the 'conservation' of Polish/Western rules for this particular region, where women had only limited property rights.

Conversely, Tambov was an 'open' territory. After it was conquered, the region attracted many migrants from all over Russia. Not having their own territorial rules, the local elites followed the traditional legal route, which was written with all sorts of problems and issues. But in terms of female property rights, the Russian path with equal access to property was more beneficial.

Also, I believe the agricultural productivity in the three provinces was different. The land in Smolensk was less fertile than in Tambov, and Smolensk did not enjoy the advantage of a capital city as Moscow did.<sup>51</sup>

The combination of these causes could explain the outlier status of Smolensk province in terms of gender issues.

Next, I discuss the important consequence of significant share of female property.

## An important consequence of a large share of wealth on female hands

First, the situation with female wealth in Russia is striking in comparison to that of female aristocrats from other countries. In Britain at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the property of around 400 female landowners in the county of Suffolk, England, comprised only 4% of the land in total.<sup>52</sup> By 1870, only 7% of the land in England was owned by women.<sup>53</sup> *'A major contrast between the British and Russian landowning elites remained the position of women'*.<sup>54</sup> *'If the Russian and English aristocratic elites had roughly similar incomes in 1800, by 1850 the English had drawn well ahead and they retained their lead up to 1914. The Germans, with the exception of*

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<sup>50</sup> [https://archive.org/details/xviii00libg\\_080/page/n15/mode/1up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/xviii00libg_080/page/n15/mode/1up?view=theater) Shpilenko

<sup>51</sup> Milov

<sup>52</sup> Davidoff and Hall, 1987, p. 276

<sup>53</sup> Liddington, 1998, pp. 245, 284

<sup>54</sup> Lieven, 1992, p. 56

*the Bohemian magnates, were far poorer in 1815 than either the English or the Russians. By 1914 the richest Germans had caught up with the Russians and were within the range of the English'.<sup>55</sup>*

*'This gives a curious sort of hue to the Conversations of the Russian Matrons which to a meek English Woman appears prodigious independence in the midst of a Despotic Government (highlighted by EK)!'<sup>56</sup>*

Second, there is common knowledge about the poor Russian nobility which led to the conclusion that the role of the elite in the ruling process was insignificant, starting with Pipes.<sup>57</sup> The question is how we understand a ruling process. Importantly, the autocratic Russian country was a weak state with poor vertical connections. Russia was a famously undergoverned country.<sup>58</sup> Stephen Velychenko observes, *'although undefined in the specialist literature, and untranslatable into Russian, this term [undergoverned] includes the idea that a government which has successfully monopolized the use of physical violence does not have enough administrators per capita to carry out policies effectively and efficiently. From this perspective, a unique attribute of the tsarist bureaucracy was not its bigness or pathologies but its smallness'.<sup>59</sup>*

The question is, then: how was the country governed in the first place? Elections took place within the different social corporations (estates). A huge role was given to the nobility, which elected almost 50% of local officials. In this connection, the fact that women had such a large share of landed property is directly connected to the ruling of the Russian Empire.

In 1831, female landowners with more than 100 serfs received the right to transfer their electoral vote (proxy vote) to any nobleman. This law confirmed the rights of noblewomen, bestowed onto them under Catherine's Manifesto of 1766. It is difficult to understand why the phenomenon of the voting rights of Russian noblewomen did not arouse the keen interest of researchers<sup>60</sup>. After all, it meant that women in the Russian Empire received a basic civil right, and the authorities granted this right on their own initiative in the absence of any broad discussion in the society of the 'female question'. Apparently, the main reason for such a weak interest in this story lies in the fact that, as A.V. Florovsky, described it that the voices of the noblewomen *'were essentially empty since it is rare that a noblewoman put forward candidates and, therefore, acted actively in the election, although the number of votes of ladies was significant'*.<sup>61</sup> However, were these voices really empty? I argue that this was not the case.

It is difficult to unequivocally answer the question about the reasons for the appearance of this law in Russian legislation in the first place in 1766. According to Florovsky, *'for Empress Catherine, this right was a consequence of involving the largest possible number of nobles in the organization of the Commission.'*<sup>62</sup> The same motives surfaced in the drafting of the law of 1831. But in my opinion, it was more important that the noblewomen had broad property rights. *'In the pre-revolutionary world, only property owners who paid taxes, in other words, heads of families,*

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<sup>55</sup> Lieven, 1992, p. 72

<sup>56</sup> Wilmot, 1971, p. 234

<sup>57</sup> Pipes, 1974, p. 179

<sup>58</sup> Jones, p. 13, Velychenko, 2001, p. 347, Mironov, 2014, Gatrell, 1995, p. 42; The review of the latest historiography appears in Lyubichankovski, 2007, p. 343, Korchmina, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Velychenko, 2001, pp. 347–48.

<sup>60</sup> See Korf, 1906, Madariaga, 2002, p. 234; Florovskiy, 1915; Minnikes, 2006, p. 98; Ul'yanina, 2004, pp. 51–59; Il'in & Karamyshev, 1996.

<sup>61</sup> Florovskiy, 1915, p. 256

<sup>62</sup> Florovskiy, 1915, p. 256

had citizenship, that is, civil and political rights'<sup>63</sup>. In Russia, the situation was different, as I showed earlier.

To what extent did noblewomen exercise their rights? Florovsky wrote that the number of ladies' votes in the elections of deputies to the Legislative Commission in 1766 was significant (1/5 of all proxy votes)<sup>64</sup>. Calculations by V.I. Veretennikov for the same period show that the share of women's proxy votes reached 25%, and on average ranged from 15 to 20% in the district<sup>65</sup>.

I have collected individual data from elections in Ryazan in the 1840s. In 1847, the share of women's proxy votes in different districts of the Ryazan province ranged from 14 to 40% (see Table 7).

Table 7. Female proxy votes in noble elections in Ryazan in 1847

	Total	Votes					
		From them					
		Male voters		Female proxy voters		Male proxy voters	
		votes	%	votes	%	Votes	%
Sapozhok	15	9	60.00	6	40.00	0	0.00
Spassk	19	7	36.84	7	36.84	5	26.32
Ryazhsk	24	13	54.17	7	29.17	2	8.33
Dankov	15	5	33.33	3	20.00	7	46.67
Mikhailov	22	12	54.55	6	27.27	4	18.18
Pronsk	21	10	47.62	3	14.29	8	38.10
Total	116	56	48.28	32	27.59	26	22.41

Sources: GARO, f. 99, op. 1, d. 108.

Do these data indicate that women were reluctant to assert their rights for proxy voting? The answer in this case will depend on the assessment of the activity of the nobility in the triannual elections as a whole. In my opinion, it is indisputable that women's votes, at least in the Ryazan province, were significant and could influence the results of the elections.

How did women formulate and to whom did they delegate their proxy votes? In 1850, in the Ryazan province, 12 votes (33%) were given to a spouse, 4 (11%) to a son, 5 (14%) to other relatives and 15 (42%) to people who were not related to the owner<sup>66</sup>. A third of proxy votes were transferred at the last moment, literally a week before the elections, and in this case, as a rule, to the spouse. Principally, the proxy votes' papers were written in a clerk's handwriting, and only occasionally in one's own hand. There was no single form of this document. It usually begins as in this example, in which a noblewoman referred to the law: *'I transfer my right, on the basis of Articles 59 and paragraph 4 of 71 of the same charter, to participate in the upcoming elections and give a vote in all affairs of the assembly of the Ryazan province to my husband ...'*<sup>67</sup> Sometimes they began as follows: *'I most humbly ask you to dispose of my vote at your discretion in the upcoming noble elections this year, both in the county and provincial ballots, on the basis of the*

<sup>63</sup> Abrams, 2011, p. 243

<sup>64</sup> Florovskyi, 1915, p. 256

<sup>65</sup> Veretennikov, 1911, p. 9

<sup>66</sup> GARO, f. 99, op. 1, 1850, file. 185.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

*legal provisions available for that.*<sup>68</sup> It is interesting that sometimes women considered it necessary to motivate the transfer of the right to vote by the impossibility of personally participating in the meeting: *'I should have come to the meeting of the nobility, but as I personally ... can't, then I transfer my right ... to my husband.'*<sup>69</sup> The paradox of such a formula was that it implied the right of a woman not only to observe but to participate in the meeting, although in fact, she did not have any such right. The explanation, apparently, should be sought in the fact that the landowners simply used the established formulas for writing such documents<sup>70</sup>, and these formulations were not specifically feminine<sup>71</sup>.

To use the language of modern suffrage, the 'mandate' (proxy vote) given by noblewomen was not 'imperative'. At the same time, despite the clarifications, the law was by no means clear to everyone, which caused numerous conflicts. In 1836, one landowner in the Ryazan province was dissatisfied with the results of the elections. Titov wrote a letter to the Minister of Internal Affairs: *'1. Colonel Korobina transferred her vote to Prince Volkonsky, an outsider, while she, having a husband, could not transfer her vote to another person, and her husband's non-appearance at the elections did not yet give her to transfer her vote to someone else. 2. In the same way, the landowner Selivanova gave her vote to her relative G. Selivanov, who is neither her husband, nor her son, nor her son-in-law. This vote was transferred to Selivanov, as an outsider. However, her husband, staff captain Selivanov, was even in person during the elections in the city of Ryazan'*<sup>72</sup>. In general, according to Titov, *'the votes of the women increase the number of voters, and only a significant mass of presented voters can oppose the spirit of cunning and parties'*.<sup>73</sup> The official response from the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that *'a noblewoman could transfer her vote to any nobleman who would meet the requirements of the law'* and *'Mrs. P Korobina, wishing to participate in elections, can transfer this right to an outsider.'*<sup>74</sup> Basically, the central authorities confirmed the right of women to use their proxy votes as they please. The results of the elections were not changed.

The conflict demonstrates that women's proxy votes were important for local elections and influenced the outcome of the elections.

## Conclusion.

Analysing the share of female property across different Russian regions shows that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the share of female estates increased fourfold, from 10% to 40%, then froze and began declining slowly. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the share of women among the top landowners continued to fall. Such a huge increase in the share of property owned by women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century happened mainly because women were made heirs more and more often over time.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century women were considered honorable heirs. The second important way of increasing the share of female property was based on high economic activity of women who bought estates more intensely than men in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> Compare with the wording in 1767: *'... ya soglashayus' s ikh vyborom i nastavleniyem, kotoroy oni zdelat' izvolyat...* [I agree with their choice and instruction, which they will make] // Olga Glagoleva, Ingrid Schierle, 2021, 64. Compare with the wording in 1905: *'Vo vsem zakonno uchinennom po sey doverennosti ya tebe veryu, sporit' i prekoslovit' ne budu* [In everything legally done under this power of attorney, I believe you, I will not argue and contradict]'. // Voroshilova, 2011, p. 43

<sup>71</sup> Compare with the wording from male proxy vote by Nikolai Bukhvostov, who transferred his vote to his son: *'svoye pravo uchastvovat' vo vsekh delakh sobraniya i v vyborakh synu moyemu shtabs-kapitanu Petru Nikolayevichu Bukhvostovu* [my right to participate in all the affairs of the meeting and in the elections to my son, staff captain Pyotr Nikolaevich Bukhvostov]'. // GARO, f. 99, op. 1, d. 175, page 11.

<sup>72</sup> GARO, f. 5, op. 1, file. 2032. page. 4 ob.-5.

<sup>73</sup> GARO, f. 5, op. 1, file. 2032. page. 5 ob.

<sup>74</sup> GARO, f. 5, op. 1, file. 2032. page. 8-8 ob.

Measuring inequality using the new introduced sources shows that elite inequality was heterogenous among different provinces. The Gini coefficient was 0.68 in Moscow, 0.65 in Tambov and 0.56 in Smolensk. As predicted, my inequality estimates are much lower than those established in the historiography. Drawing on my unique dataset I estimated the gender gap in wealth and income. It was around 25% across provinces. So, we can tell that equal access to property, which was established in 1715, resulted in Russia becoming among quite a gender equal countries even nowadays in 100 years.

As a result, noblewomen in the Russian Empire received proxy voting rights, and the authorities granted this basic civil right on their own initiative, without any broad societal discussion of the 'female question'.



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