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Entrepreneurial Women and the Business of Self-Development in Global Russia

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If you want to understand how gender is changing in Russia, you need to talk to women in business and sales,” my friend Yulia said to me as we walked through the streets of St. Petersburg one summer afternoon in 2006. I gave her a curious look. She explained, “They are on the front lines when it comes to how Russians understand womanhood.” In her early thirties with a graduate degree in psychology, Yulia had just accepted a position as marketing director at a transnational advertising firm. She had left her job as an English teacher because she found her new opportunity more interesting and lucrative. Yulia’s choice nevertheless presented challenges in terms of finding friends and romantic partners who respected her as a professional and as a woman. By virtue of her career in business (*bisnes*), she had entered a domain that Russian journalists, politicians, and people in everyday life constructed as male. Indeed, when I mentioned to Russian friends and academic colleagues that I wanted to learn about the lives of businesswomen, some volunteered that such women were “abnormal” and therefore had little to reveal about contemporary Russian issues. However, I agreed with Yulia that these women’s experiences reflected how the nation’s market economy has led to new social spaces for women.

Specifically, I am concerned with the efforts of Russian entrepreneurial women to render intelligible the fact that they have interests outside their families, actual or potential. Moreover, I analyze how they reconcile these interests with their womanhood (*zhenstvennost’*) despite possible contradictions between them. In her discussion of contemporary Russian attitudes about gender, Michele Rivkin-Fish calls attention to public attempts to reinvigorate masculinity and guard domesticity. She posits, “Even articulating notions of autonomy and a concept of women’s interests unrelated to their role as mothers requires immense courage” (Rivkin-Fish 2010, 10–11). Cultural change implies shifts in political economy that create a new opportunity structure and new ways for people to make sense of the positions they occupy (Ramamurthy 2010). Among Russians, a major facet of contemporary life is the effort to make moral sense of their entrepreneurial projects (Patino 2009). Women in the Russian commercial world have confronted not only the presumed masculine nature of their work but also post-Soviet attitudes regarding business as corrupt and businesspeople as lacking in concern for others (Ries 2002). These attitudes have translated into discriminatory workplace policies and conflicts with women’s spouses and relatives, who often urge them to focus on their families. State benefits during the late 2000s, meanwhile, reflected the Putin administration’s turn toward a more authoritarian government, with highly targeted welfare benefits favoring young, pregnant, married women

and their husbands (Cook 2009, 3). Women without the desire or ability to form nuclear families needed active strategies for living without spousal and government support. In what ways did women resist these attitudes and policies?

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork with women who occupied management positions in St. Petersburg and Moscow firms. I focus here on women in small and medium-sized businesses. My informants shared challenges similar to Yulia's difficulties in forging a socially legible identity. They embraced language from corporate motivational culture that stressed the importance of being a goal-oriented person (*tseleustremlyeny chelovek*). Women read literature by many authors, much of it addressing male corporate audiences, that focused on themes of success and positive thinking. Some also attended seminars and lectures run by local and transnational firms. Since the late 1980s, these firms have marketed their services to other Russian companies and to women and men of a variety of socioeconomic classes; they have offered a way for Russians to navigate a privatized Russia, with its insufficient social safety net. A common idea cutting across these different sources was the significance of articulating a purpose (*tseľ*) for one's life. Yulia had watched the English-language film *The Secret* (2006), which encouraged viewers to make vision boards (called in Russian *kollazhy mechty*, or "dream collages") composed of magazine cutouts depicting their goals. As one entrepreneur interviewed in *The Secret* stressed, "You become what you think about most, but you also attract what you think about most," and this message resonated deeply among many women. Yulia most wanted to travel the world through vacations and meetings with her employer's foreign work partners. For her, travel signified the opportunity to learn about other cultures and build relationships and thus provided a motivating framework for her work life in Russia. Women's projects of self-formation are radical in a context where political and other leaders have long discouraged them from authoring their own desires. They undermine cultural attitudes that motherhood and marriage are the only acceptable aspirations for women. These women's embrace of individuated rather than structural modes of change nonetheless reflects the insufficient opportunities for women to directly affect Russian social welfare policies, the mass media, or the enforcement of antidiscrimination policies within corporations.

Methods

To understand how women forged a social niche for themselves, I conducted nineteen months of fieldwork between 2005 and 2010 with highly educated managerial women and their families, spouses, romantic partners, colleagues, and friends. Research methods included participant observation in professional, domestic, and recreational settings in addition to a series of semistructured interviews with each of the twenty-six women who served as key informants.¹ I chose to conduct research in St. Petersburg and Moscow because of their prominence as Russia's largest cities and business centers and because their populations contain the range of class backgrounds that I hoped to examine among women.

¹I selected informants through snowball sampling in order to get to know women who belonged to the same networks of colleagues and friends and thus place their lives in a social context. Interviews were conducted in Russian or English, depending on which language research participants chose. Most interviews were conducted in Russian, and Russian language interviews were translated by me. Both transcripts and field notes from participant observations are on file with me, and I have changed all identifying information in order to protect research participants' privacy and confidentiality.

In my previous ethnographic fieldwork with highly educated urban women, I found that women's decisions to migrate to the big cities in Russia reflected and reinforced preexisting class differences (Mazzarino 2006). Living in these large cities, I gained a privileged perspective on these differences and the distinctive importance of new motivational cultures to women who were internal migrants seeking upward socioeconomic mobility.

Most of the women participating in my research owned small, service-oriented firms in sectors such as tourism, private education, or intercultural communications. Others occupied managerial positions within larger companies or were working to start their own firms, for example, by attending business school. I chose to group together women from these diverse professional categories because they constituted a group at the level of Russian public imaginaries. Russians I knew spoke about women with a variety of professional statuses as "businesswomen." They referred to these women as possessing specific character traits (e.g., tough, decisive, and purposeful)—traits associated with masculinity in Russian media and popular discourse (Bridger, Kay, and Pinnick 1996, 118–46; Yurchak 2003, 73). These associations also came up at dozens of conferences run by politicians and businesswomen, among entrepreneurial women themselves, and in my everyday conversations with Russians of various professional backgrounds.

Most significant, the women who participated in my research referred to themselves as "businesswomen" (*delovye zhenshchiny* or, in the singular, *delovaia zhenshchina*). The term denoted that they were their own and others' bosses and that they were able to stand by and argue persuasively for their points of view. Some women volunteered that another term, *bisnesledi* (businesslady), popular in women's magazines and on television, less aptly described their positions than did *delovaia zhenshchina*, which can be translated literally as "a woman with important matters" or "with things to do." As one informant, Oksana, said to me, "Work in business [*v bisnese*] is more than work in business. It's about learning how to manage [*spravliatsia*] like with husbands and children—how to delegate tasks, how to convince them of things." Women's use of *delovaia zhenshchina* reflected the significance of their work lives as a laboratory for crafting subjectivities and navigating a range of challenges.

My primary focus in this article is on a subset of women who participated in motivational seminars. These women also discussed media promoting positive thinking with other people. These women tended to be single or divorced. They were also less socioeconomically well-off than other informants. Their socioeconomic positions were influenced by decisions they had made to divorce, not to marry, or to migrate. Women turned to motivational services where, for manageable prices, they ostensibly could learn to become more emotionally and economically self-sufficient (*samostoitel'nye*). These services also created alternative opportunities for women to forge social networks. The other women whose stories I discuss in this article similarly emphasized thinking and rethinking about their own priorities as a way to deal with work-family tensions, but they did so outside of the structures of paid seminars.

A narrow majority of my research participants were in their twenties and thirties, and I found that the tensions that this group managed were particularly intense, since these women

were in a period of their lives when their relatives and peers expected them to marry and become mothers. However, older women entering marriage or motherhood later, or caring for grandchildren, faced similar tensions between their work and personal lives. Across generations, women valued individualized strategies of making do for different reasons: older women saw moves such as the decision to remain calm and confident and to care for themselves as extensions of their experiences during socialism, when they juggled leadership positions at work with caring for families. Younger women understood a focus on cultivating themselves as a response to contemporary demands that they focus on their families' needs. Both outlooks had in common women's attempts to guard a space for themselves as emotionally impervious and irreducible to other peoples' expectations.

Russian businesswomen as a whole, including my informants, are far from a homogenous group. Given the many forms of diversity in my sample, my purpose in this article is not to generalize about the population of businesswomen in general or to represent their full diversity of experiences in Russia. Rather, I seek to reveal hidden heterogeneities in these women's experiences as I explore how they navigated old and new social tensions in their lives.

Women and business in 2000s Russia

During the 2000s, the number of Russian women who owned their own businesses increased exponentially.² In Russia's volatile economic climate with limited workforce protections for women, many women viewed working for themselves as a form of "self-help" (Salmenniemi, Karhunen, and Kosonen 2011, 83). Among my research informants, those in their twenties and thirties faced particular difficulties gaining positions at already existing corporations for reasons they perceived as related to their gender.³ To own their own firms was to have greater control over their employment status, a flexible schedule that enabled them to balance paid and domestic work, and a chance at upward socioeconomic mobility. By extension, it suggested that it was possible for women to make their own choices, as consumers of products and in terms of their romantic partners, with less need to rely financially on others. Alyona (age 36), a divorced mother of two, described her decision to start her own tourism firm: "I wanted to know that my future depended on me and my own decisions, and not the decisions of my husband."

It was nevertheless difficult for women to start their own firms. From the 1990s onward, former socialist real estate and equipment, as well as jobs in newly privatized enterprises, were divided mainly among a particular group of elite men. Women who started their own firms often relied on their families for financial and other material resources. They also had to locate networks of other professionals who respected their abilities, who would use or recommend their services, and who would barter with them (see Ledeneva 2006, 91–163).

²Women managers in Russia remain most numerous, however, in the small-business service sector, where they comprise approximately 35 percent of all personnel in top management positions; this is compared with less than 20 percent in such positions within larger corporations. The former positions tend to be lower paid (Viacheslavovna 2008).

³Reported rates of hiring discrimination are highest among younger, better-educated women (Johnson 2007, 64). In a 2008 survey of over two thousand highly educated St. Petersburg women between the ages sixteen and thirty-four, 4 percent claimed that they had been asked at job interviews to sign a statement promising that they would not get pregnant. Sixty percent had been asked during a job interview if they had children (Mendelson 2008).

As Alyona's case exemplifies, a common strategy was to rely on wealthier husbands. Ekaterina (age 57) entered the construction industry in 1998 by founding her own equipment firm. In contrast to the service sectors of education, cross-cultural communications, and consulting, construction was a lucrative industry in which men predominated as managers. Ekaterina was able to gain the cooperation of men in the industry through her husband, an executive at a transnational construction firm, who supplied her with American-made equipment. As Ekaterina began to spend full days at her office, her husband insisted that she spend more time cooking and cleaning. She hired a maid and began to purchase fast food so that she would not have to cook. Months went by during which Ekaterina spent more than half of her salary providing these services for her family. The people who women depended on for resources often also discouraged them from working and depleted their earnings.

Statistics on the popularity of business among Russian women are striking in light of the fact that women have relatively few resources to pursue this path. Sociologist Anna Temkina (2008) characterizes 2000s Russia as a "cultural patriarchy" (*kul'tur'ny patriarkhat*) marked by a "strengthening of patriarchal tendencies in the symbolic sphere [of politics and the media] and the maintenance of structured gender inequalities" (53). Temkina contrasts Russia's unequal opportunity structure with a tendency among educated urban women to "describe themselves as responsible, competent, and active" and to strive "for control over their own lives" (21). In Temkina's work, "control over their own lives" refers not to direct political action against these structural inequalities. She focuses instead on a tendency for urban women to seek more pleasurable sexual relationships and notes their decisions to pursue their own careers. To build on Temkina's findings, I explore women's rationales for turning toward changing their own behaviors and thoughts and the social implications of this approach to change.

Women had difficulty seeing themselves recognized by their families, their coworkers, and in the mass media. Twenty-five-year-old Alexandra, a manager at a transnational engineering firm, described how she felt when she looked at the billboards, news kiosks, and political advertising in St. Petersburg: "I look around here, and don't see myself anywhere. Either you see beautiful women who are made up and dressed expensively, on the cover of *Cosmo*, and all they want is sex with men; or you see mothers and wives with two or three children. I don't want those things." To Alexandra, these portrayals represented a social climate in which people did not care about the lives and diverse interests of women. Moreover, she referred to the resurgence, in recent years, in positive valuations of Josef Stalin in political and media discourses and to her belief that Russia was not far from a totalitarian future in which people with money would be persecuted.

These trends reflected the attitudes of people closest to Alexandra. Her parents and relatives did not support her decision to pursue a business career and postpone marriage and motherhood indefinitely. They wanted her to marry, have at least one child, and, if she was going to work, enter academia, as they had. Alexandra worried that in the event that she could no longer make her own money because of illness or old age, neither the government nor her family would care about her enough to support her financially or, in her family's case, spend time with her. She planned to migrate to the United States that year. She believed that regardless of her social future there, she would be able to plan for an adequate

retirement.⁴ Alexandra was among the wealthier and better-connected women I knew. Her experiences with international travel, her English fluency, and her family's high position in the former Soviet bureaucracy might have ideally prepared her to make a life in Russia. However, her anxieties about social uncertainties in Russia—and especially for unmarried, childless women—compelled her to leave. Her case underscores that belonging within Russia involves articulating a socially valued role (Höjdestrand 2009; Zigon 2010), a task that in many women's cases was complicated by gender and socioeconomic class.

Other women had neither the means nor the desire to leave Russia, and they struggled with the absence of people who saw them as they saw themselves. Yana (age 29) received her university degree from a prestigious economics program in St. Petersburg. With a former classmate, she went on to cofound a cultural consulting firm for foreign businesspeople in Russia, where she was the director of finance. Yana viewed her work as a source of social interaction with other women and of satisfaction for herself. A year after she started, she married Dmitri, an executive at a transnational car company. Dmitri expected that Yana would be present in their apartment when he was home. When she got pregnant in 2007, he urged her to stop working altogether. Dmitri viewed Yana's work as unnecessary to their household because he earned more than she did. He also saw her dedication to her work as "abnormal" (*nenormal'naia*); she was an expectant mother who should guard her own health. The women's inability to find themselves reflected in others' expectations of them was commonly epitomized by accusations that they were abnormal.

To maintain their romantic partnerships and other important relationships, women felt compelled to perform particular identities. Yana regularly lied to Dmitri about her whereabouts on evenings when she worked late, a strategy that other women also used. She told him that she was visiting her parents or sister, all of whom lived in the same neighborhood. Yana had to convince her family to cover for her should Dmitri call them looking for her. They were reluctant to do so. All voiced agreement with Dmitri that Yana's dedication to her work was not normal. They also disapproved of her decision to have her own business in the first place: Yana's parents, her grandparents, and her sister all had worked for the Department of Transportation and wanted her to do the same. They viewed her expertise in finance as unimportant (*ne vazhno*), a reflection of their belief that only work that produced a concrete good or service was worthwhile. For Yana, lying about work meant recognizing her loved ones' unwillingness to acknowledge her. If she told Dmitri the truth about where she was going, then she faced the prospect of either having to quit or scale back on her work. This was not an option for her. Yana believed that no matter her husband's income, she should have her own financial means. Another risk she perceived in working and lying about it was that she might jeopardize her relationship with her husband and her family's approval. Yana's case illustrates just how complicated it can be for women to develop lives that depart from others' expectations.

⁴At the time (in 2007) pensions were set at three thousand rubles per month (about US \$120).

The cultural salience of “purpose”

Women nonetheless managed to carve out spaces where others did not assume what their priorities were. When I asked them to tell me about important people and events in their lives, they elaborated at greatest length about people with whom they had shared moments of contemplation, or *razmyshlenie*. These moments took place during social interactions in their workplaces and in the classes and seminars that women considered a part of their own development as businesswomen. A crosscutting theme in women’s conversations was the significance of articulating what they wanted and prioritized. Women used various words to describe their desires—among them, purpose (*tseľ*) and task (*zadacha*). They used these terms interchangeably to refer to goals at various levels of abstraction. As Vera (age 42) told me, “Both words can mean something abstract or something concrete. For example, I want to teach people to understand and empathize with one another, and a friend of mine wants her own car.” She continued: “Knowing what you want is an important part of your self-development.” The ability to choose one’s goals was more important than what those goals were.

During the socialist period, politicians, teachers, and the mass media prescribed certain imperatives for women and left men’s roles far more ambiguous, particularly within their families. I asked a friend in her thirties who attended motivational seminars if she thought that the significance of having a purpose was a theme in Soviet life. She replied, “Women knew that they must be good citizens, good wives, good mothers, and good specialists. A woman in the USSR thought about what she must—must do, must be—but not about what she wanted. The concept of *tseľ*—of personal purpose—came with the onset of democratic values in Russia. In the Soviet Union, there were no conversations about the purpose of your *own life*.” Women who recalled the socialist period did not always see the imperative to work as expanding their opportunities; alongside caretaking and household work, paid work often proved a burden. Moreover, many believed that the drudgery and amount of work during socialism directly influenced their own—and their mothers’—lack of energy and capacity to reimagine and remake their lives in the absence of the Soviet Union’s older social infrastructure. Vera told me that her mother had been depressed since the early 1990s, when she first lost her job as a teacher; she spent long periods of time in bed. Vera attributed her mother’s depression to the fact that she never had the opportunity to spend much time on things other than caretaking and work. When it was no longer possible to work, she felt depleted and directionless. Vera’s interpretation of her mother’s condition reflects her own sense that women needed time and social spaces to forge life paths not solely focused on labor for their families and their government.

Beginning in the late 1980s, new messages about what women should do and want surfaced in Russian public life. Some media and political narratives in the 1990s associated socialism with women’s forced participation in the workforce and, by extension, the emasculation of men. These same sources correlated Russia’s transition from socialist oppression with women’s return to the home (Funk and Mueller 1993; Sutcliffe 2009, 18–19). Mikhail Gorbachev (1988) advocated a general ideology of entrepreneurship and innovation as key to peoples’ ability to survive a privatizing economy, but his speeches targeting women told another story.⁵ Concerned with low fertility, Gorbachev and state demographers initiated a

barrage of policies and media campaigns that attempted to nudge women out of the workforce and back into the home. These discourses linked women's decisions about marriage and childbirth to the nation's demographic and moral future. They dovetailed with structural readjustment programs and corresponding cuts in jobs and public services, of which women, as a group, bore the brunt (Hemment 2007, 78). These campaigns and socioeconomic shifts intensified the challenge for women to articulate futures that departed from national agendas.

In this inhospitable climate, entrepreneurial women developed strategies of self-legitimation in order to make sense of their lives. Often this meant appropriating an array of new neoliberal languages that emphasized "self-mastery in the face of the uncertainties that come with global economic flexibility" (Freeman 2007, 261). Motivational seminars and media were created by a diverse set of actors and have a complex history in Russia. Among the largest and most influential motivational companies in the 1990s was New Life, a US-based corporation. New Life first entered Russia in 1989 through negotiations with the Russian Academy of Sciences. At the close of New Life's first seminar, American leaders urged everyone to participate in advanced seminars and become seminar leaders or trainers, and some did. New Life went bankrupt during the financial crisis in 1998, leaving some of its Russian personnel in severe debt. Vera, for example, had been persuaded by New Life trainers to give up a very lucrative Moscow business that offered English-language tutoring in order to run a franchise for the corporation in her home city, Stavropol. The decision ultimately left her in thousands of dollars of debt. However, Vera eventually translated the set of skills she learned with the company and her connections with foreigners into sustainable practices for her own moderately profitable motivational business.

Of the various social arenas in which Russians looked to these media and programs as a kind of survival strategy, business was among the most prominent. Cultural messages in urban Russia portrayed the idea that anyone could start a firm "on their own" (*sam*). Street kiosks and bookstores were full of literature, such as *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Timothy Ferriss (2007) and *Business Is Psychology* (*Biznes—eto psikhologiya*) by Marina Melia (2005), that posited that if people articulated their talents and desires, they could bill themselves as "experts" (*experty*) in the fields of their choice. Other books advertised themselves as valuable tools for self-marketing and management, as well as blueprints for everyday social interactions. Most critically from the perspectives of women I knew, the Russian translation of Rhonda Byrne's 2005 book, *The Secret* (*Sekret*) appeared in bookstores throughout St. Petersburg and Moscow in 2009. Media and programs focused on personal change held substantial appeal among women and working-class men, who had fewer social connections and less start-up capital than their wealthier, better-connected male counterparts. Among these services were seminars designed specifically for women, to help them gain more confidence in the workforce as a means of keeping their jobs. Entrepreneurial women whom I got to know referred to these practices of thinking and acting as "self-development" and emphasized the importance of new practices and habits of thought that would enhance their everyday social interactions and experiences. Over tea, Vera advised a younger informant,

⁵See also Gorbachev's 1987 speech on "Women and the Family."

Svetlana (age 25), about the latter's hope to meet more people who could teach her about business. Vera encouraged her not to be afraid to strike up a conversation with someone unknown to her if that person seemed interesting: "Even if they aren't interested in talking, you know you're the kind of person who is able to try. Maybe the next person will be."

These media and seminars nevertheless reflected the powerful ways in which conflicting expectations were infused into daily life. In one seminar that Vera attended, the leader, a Russian man, called her a "bitch" for stating that her purpose was to make enough money to be financially independent of her husband. Two years later, when Vera began to head her own motivational business, she articulated a new purpose: increasing understanding between people from different cultures and ways of life, including people who did not agree about what was normal for women to do in society. Vera based her framing of purpose on firsthand experience with those who did not respect decisions she had made. She had divorced her husband in part because he resented her commitment to her work and threatened her with physical violence when she traveled for business. While her new, charitable framing of her life purpose was more conventionally feminine than her initial economic goal, Vera was concerned with expanding the range of culturally legitimate life choices for women.

Films and books contained similarly sexist content, although the advantage of less interactive settings was that women could pick and choose what information was useful to them. Yana shared with me her copy of *Business Is Psychology*, which discussed the importance of purpose to maintain energy. It assumed a male reader throughout, and only one chapter, which explained different management styles, was devoted specifically to women; each of these styles related to a role in the family. Yana stressed to me that one needed to read these books carefully for what was interesting in them. Women negotiated the world of self-development by pulling meaning and satisfaction from a variety of sources.

Political disenfranchisement

There are certainly other imaginable ways, besides changing everyday practices, for women to gain material resources and recognition—for example, from a Western perspective, direct participation in the political process through organizing voting blocs. Scholars of Russia have noted peoples' retreat from public institutions and political participation. Russians invest time, money, and energy in the privatized domains of their apartments and families as an attempt to distance themselves from a social and political order perceived to be inhumane, opaque, and indifferent (Rivkin-Fish 2004, 298; Shevchenko 2009, 152–65; Zdravomyslova, Rotkirch, and Temkina 2009, 4). My research expands on this literature by illustrating how gendered messages in politics and popular culture inflect women's apathy toward collective solutions.

Women saw little promise in looking to politicians to address their concerns. Alexandra told me, "Russian politicians speak *about* women without considering what *they* want." She cited issues such as inadequate state services for the elderly and children, whom women like her were otherwise expected to support, and the government's overwhelming concentration of media and material assistance directed toward raising birthrates. Young women interested in

gendered issues not directly related to marriage and motherhood saw political participation as futile.

Some older, well-connected women had a different relationship to politics. A telling counterexample was Ekaterina, who regularly consulted with St. Petersburg's then-mayor Valentina Matvienko on laws that she believed would benefit the network of businesswomen she had been organizing since the late 1990s. She nevertheless volunteered that not everyone had direct access to politicians as she did. Ekaterina knew Matvienko through her connections with several of the mayor's colleagues, dating back to her university studies. Hers was an example of how personal networks facilitated communication with politicians, not of generalized opportunities to participate in politics.

Another set of collective solutions might have been for women to organize and exchange multiple forms of support. Indeed, some informants had established networks with one another. These groups were nonetheless exclusive in key respects. The networks of women who had the most connections and financial resources to share also tended to support the idea of marriage and motherhood as primary markers of a woman's identity—a perspective that reflected the fact that some of these women had become successful with the considerable help of their husbands' money and connections. Ekaterina and other experienced businesswomen extended loans, advice, and moral support to less experienced women and organized seminars on self-confidence and management techniques. They also held award ceremonies for women who had successful firms and for those who had managed to have large families of three or more children. Ekaterina stressed that family—and specifically marriage and motherhood—was a woman's most important marker of success. Her network was not a space where any way of being a woman was acceptable, a point that two other informants made when they attended one of the award ceremonies for women with larger families. It was not just a lack of ability or desire to take part in collective solutions that discouraged some women from doing so but the fact that certain collective solutions themselves were perceived as constraining and homogenizing forces.

Local women's organizations such as Ekaterina's were also exclusive in terms of social class. Ethnographers who study activist organizations in the postsocialist world have long noted the distance, in terms of socioeconomic status and former rank within the Communist Party, between these organizations' leadership and those they ostensibly served (Berg 2004; Hemment 2004). My informants were no exception. Ekaterina would meet only with women who had had profitable businesses for five years or more and who could demonstrate continuous growth in profits. Svetlana, for example, asked me to pass on a request to Ekaterina that the two of them meet to talk about her plans to start a tourism firm, and the latter refused, pointing out that women who did not already have a firm need not apply. Notably, Ekaterina also discouraged women's collaborations with foreign entrepreneurial men and women based on the rationale that "only Russians know how to do business in Russia." She told me about her earlier encounters in the 1990s with a group of women from the International Rotary Club, who had purported to teach her and her companions how to run a firm, not acknowledging that women had their own sets of skills adapted from socialism. Her rationale made sense, and yet younger women often depended heavily on

connections with foreigners for English skills, start-up capital, and connections with foreign clients and colleagues.

Nor was Russia's political climate conducive to establishing publicly visible, formalized organizations, as Janet Elise Johnson's article in this cluster illustrates (Johnson 2013). As part of my effort to recruit informants in 2007, I made numerous attempts to phone organizations of local businesswomen that I had found on the Internet and to stop by the addresses they listed. However, the phone numbers for organizations I found in St. Petersburg were out of service, and the addresses led me to abandoned buildings on the outskirts of the city or places that were altogether different—including a bakery and a kindergarten. Several women I eventually met through my own connections with Russian academic colleagues considered themselves to be part of these organizations, yet they had stopped actively updating their contact information years before as a way to avoid paying taxes and falling under government scrutiny.

Self-development and its Russian contours

Even beyond these disincentives for collective participation, self-development held appeal to women in and of itself. Women spoke of structural changes in Russia during the 1990s and 2000s that made individualized solutions compelling in and of themselves. Health care and education diminished in quality and accessibility. Organizations such as labor unions and the *komsomol* (a Soviet youth organization), which once made work and school highly social settings, disappeared from peoples' lives. My older informants felt these changes acutely in the worsening of their material quality of life and their loss of a sense that they were part of some larger social entity. In this changed context, self-development was not simply a last resort; methods for people to cultivate calm, upbeat, and confident demeanors gained wide cultural resonance in Russian society. In the context of the state's radical retreat, politicians, journalists, and corporate leaders began to construct postsocialist subjects as the driving forces of their own lives. Russians of different genders and professions grasped these discourses as highly efficacious ways to adapt to new realities.

While people who embraced self-help messages might very well have felt themselves benefiting from these services, they also were fulfilling larger societal interests. Social science literature has emphasized the misleading and depoliticizing implications of programs and media that encourage people to change their own everyday practices to transform their lives (Rivkin-Fish 2005, 123–51; Ehrenreich 2009; Goodkind 2009). A parallel line of work critiques how the selves that people are encouraged to realize reflect normative cultural expectations (see, e.g., Edmonds 2007; Weber 2009). In her work with reproductive health practitioners and activists in St. Petersburg, Rivkin-Fish (2004) analyzes these professionals' attempts to encourage women to cultivate their selfhood through warm, loving relationships with their families. Change, in this context, means the recovery of a specific kind of gendered personhood.

Although these studies cast a vital critical eye on individuated approaches to change, it is important to note that individuals adapt these approaches to their broader social lives in unexpected ways. Thus Yulia, with her vision board focused on her desire to travel, might

very well have been playing into the hands of a corporation that needed her to be geographically flexible, but she also wanted to see the world.

Self-development, therefore, was not simply negative or defeatist; it was also productive and validating. Men I met used vision boards as well, and they talked about their usefulness in multiple respects. Roman, a motivational trainer with a small business in Moscow, described how the message of *The Secret* and his longer affiliation with the Lifespring company had helped him to stop drinking as he focused on helping people to adapt to changed economic conditions in 1990s Russia. Evgenii, who in 2007 left the army after seventeen years of service, was struggling to establish a fledgling engineering firm in Moscow with some friends. Both of these men were arguably feeding into much larger concerns about alcoholism and unemployment among men in Russia—though these were less prominently articulated than concerns over birthrates—but they were also able to stop drinking, earn a living, and network. These examples speak to a range of ways in which entrepreneurship was both conformist and socially productive to the people I met.

Finally, self-development was not limited to individuals and their lives; it was a form of social engagement. It implicitly worked against the grain of policies and messages that portrayed people in terms of their functions in relation to larger collective goods. As Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang point out in their study of self-cultivation among Beijing pensioners, “when we see a pointed assertion of forms of life on the part of ordinary citizens, however humble they may be, we can presume that there is some deeply felt strategy at work” (2005, 320). In part, practices like martial arts, including tai chi, constituted assertions that people need more than their government provided or acknowledged—happiness and companionship, for example. Likewise, women’s practices such as the construction of vision boards undermined a neoliberal social and political order that reduced their humanity, even as their aspirations incorporated a consumerist and entrepreneurialist ethos. I elaborate on the personal and social significance of self-help through the case study of Svetlana in the following section.

Svetlana’s story: Self-development and political disenfranchisement

I relate the story of Svetlana to illustrate how the importance of individuated, motivational solutions for women made sense in a wider context of political disenfranchisement. I first met Svetlana in the fall of 2007 at a dinner at the American consulate in St. Petersburg. She approached me after hearing via an introductory announcement that I was interested in the lives of Russian businesswomen. Svetlana explained to me that she was a sales manager at a local firm. She planned to move to the United States the following year to pursue a graduate degree in business and international communications and to return to St. Petersburg after two years to start her own tourism firm. She informed me, “I have a lot to say to you about business. It is the most important form of international diplomacy: Of *course* people want to understand one another when they can make money.” As I would learn over time, Svetlana’s humanitarian rationale for her work goals was an important motivating framework on a daily basis, a form of self-presentation that made interactions with new people meaningful. She honed her sense of what she wanted by attending various seminars. She also consumed media, such as the film and book versions of *The Secret* (2006; Byrne [2005] 2009) and the

book *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* (Arntz, Chasse, and Vicente 2007), and discussed them with others.

As Svetlana began to participate in my project, we also became friends. She showed me her own vision board at home: the walls of her room had magazine cutouts taped to them—a white Audi sedan, a little girl swimming underwater reaching for a starfish, and a young woman in a business suit with a briefcase. Svetlana spoke often with me about her plans to attend graduate school in the United States; to marry her Canadian boyfriend, Steven, at the end of her time abroad; and to bring him to Russia in order to establish a tourism firm together.

These were ambitious plans. Svetlana and her mother, whom she lived with and supported, had little money to spare. Svetlana's family had few social connections to people who themselves owned firms, so it was up to Svetlana to seek out acquaintances who might form the social basis of her future business activities. Svetlana's prospective marriage to Steven was also tenuous, as she had begun to admit. Steven had stopped calling her as frequently as he once did. In short, I knew that Svetlana did not always get what she wanted by visualizing it. When she did get it, she had worked for it.

Yet when I questioned Svetlana about what seemed the most farfetched elements of her plan for the future, she maintained that the most important thing was what goals did for her—not the probability of their actually materializing. Soon after I met her, Svetlana began to attend weekly seminars at a New Age bookstore in St. Petersburg. The seminar was about positive thinking (*pozitivnoe myshlenie*) and the role of peoples' hopes for their own lives in bringing about change in the world. The leader, a man in his twenties named Oleg, drew on a variety of sources, including the film version of *The Secret*, which Svetlana had introduced and translated for the group, and a Russian translation of the Mayan calendar.

One night, after a meeting of the seminar that I had been unable to attend with Svetlana, she sent me a text message that read, "I need to talk to you. It can't be over the phone." Alarmed that she was in some sort of danger, I rushed to meet her at a bakery. I learned that she simply wanted to talk in person about the contents of the seminar. Oleg had told participants that Russian politicians spent their resources amassing weapons and preparing for wars with weaker nations over territory rather than attending to human problems such as health care. Svetlana believed Oleg when he said that this focus on the arms race would eventually lead to the end of the world. Extraterrestrial beings (*drugie sushchestva*) would see our capacity for violence and the threat we presented to the universe and attack Earth with the hopes of decimating it. According to Svetlana, because politicians did not listen to the perspectives of their constituents, only ordinary people could avert a war by increasing understanding among people in any way that they could. Svetlana believed that this would create a more peaceful atmosphere (making it less likely that extraterrestrials would attack) and change the mind-sets of politicians themselves.

After Svetlana related to me what she had learned, she explained how she saw her work life playing a positive global role. Her firm would increase understanding between Russians and Americans by getting them to interact and talk about one another's customs. "That's what

it's for. My business. It's going to help people to understand one another." I looked at her, baffled by the end-of-the-world story. I blurted out, "What if it's not true? What if the world is not going to end?" She replied, "Who cares if it's true? Isn't peace a good thing to want?" I stared back at her. "I think peace is a good thing to want," I said.

Women's goals and the narratives they told about them did not have to be realistic in order to be useful. Inna told me how she felt upon moving with her husband to St. Petersburg from Murmansk in order to seek better economic opportunities after graduating from university. At a seminar she attended through an employment agency for highly educated women, she created a vision board involving an apartment in the city's center. It would take years and hard work before she could afford to even rent such an apartment, but the goal's realization was not the important thing, she told me: "It is about learning to value the present moment. I knew why I was working each day."

Svetlana's story differs from Inna's in that the former wanted her priorities to pertain to a worthwhile social agenda rather than a strictly personal one. The bookstore seminars provided a way for her to realize this desire. For Svetlana, it was just as plausible that her day-to-day actions might avert a war as it was that participating in the political process might. She agreed with Oleg's assessment that neither Russian nor foreign politicians were concerned with questions affecting Russians' everyday lives. Like Alexandra, Svetlana thought that the money the government devoted to supporting young mothers would be more justly allocated to state-funded day care services, workforce protections for women, and sufficient care and benefits for disabled adults or the elderly. Like Alexandra, she also believed that political indifference to a range of issues had had a direct impact on her mother's emotional health. Some women connected self-development to their ability to change the world through the occult, as Svetlana did, reflecting what Jean and John Comaroff (1999) have described as a widespread attempt to keep up with a global capitalist order that provides only a select few with extraordinary opportunities. However, even those who did not believe in the occult connected their efforts with vision boards to their belief that there existed no more effective way to care for themselves and their relatives, and sometimes to affect the wider society. Alexandra described her own attempts to protect and strengthen herself physically and emotionally through martial arts—and, by extension, to care for her older relatives—in an environment of little social support or concern. Far from an idiosyncratic story about extraterrestrial beings and the apocalypse, then, Svetlana's narrative reflects a more widely resonant critique of Russian politics and society.

The social bases of goal formation

Conversations about the future can really be about social life now and peoples' notions of how it should be (Brown 2005). Entrepreneurial women's aspirations also formed the basis for relationships among others with similar interests, who together contemplated their own values and contributions. Self-development was as much about self-fashioning as it was about the social possibilities that women created in the present, lived moment and the subjectivities that they sustained as a result. Women's experiences reflected the importance of being heard by others as part of constituting selfhood. Nadieszda Kizenko's piece on Orthodox virtuosos suggests the significance of having listeners to hear one's story (2013);

women seek out confessors in order to have people hear their stories and possibly to have a conversation.⁶ In a postsocialist landscape where there exist few face-to-face forums for women to voice their experiences, entrepreneurial women similarly value listeners. It is these social experiences that hold the key to imagining their futures and a wider set of life possibilities.

Through the bookstore seminars and related motivational programs, Svetlana developed a network of acquaintances. She used her sense that goals were important as a means to recognize others who shared her own commitment to self-development. For example, she met Vera when she walked into a St. Petersburg bookstore. She found the latter delivering a lecture titled “How to Succeed in Business,” which involved the exercise of writing about the kind of future one wanted for oneself. Several months after the two of them first met for tea, Svetlana told me that Vera was the kind of woman she wanted to be in twenty years—an example that she had been searching for all of her life. Through sharing a loosely similar set of interests, Svetlana found someone who represented a more complicated experience of being a woman than what she had thought possible.

Svetlana did indeed follow through with her plans to study in the United States for a time. While she was there, Vera and others looked in on Svetlana’s mother and connected Svetlana with their own acquaintances in the United States. When she returned to Russia, they also hosted her in their homes in Moscow to network with others in the tourism industry. With this network and with role models such as Vera whom she found within it, Svetlana’s sense of dependence on her boyfriend Steven as a source of knowledge and business connections waned. She realized that she could look toward people at home, rather than her relationship with him, in order to forge the future she wanted.

Svetlana’s story therefore reveals the social possibilities of individuated change. In his analysis of “technologies of the self” in contemporary Russia, Tomas Matza highlights the limits of confidence building as a way for Russians to wield more control over their everyday social interactions; people constantly encounter instances of rudeness (*khamstvo*) and the general “messiness of social relations” (2009, 511). My informants were less concerned with whether they got exactly what they wanted than they were with goal formation as a personal and social end in itself. They established fluid communities of people who helped one another as they moved through the world and socialized with different publics. Svetlana’s case speaks to literature on gender and sexuality that seeks ways to think about urban social change beyond the language and organization of social movements.⁷

Discussion

Women’s personalized approaches to change worked against the epistemic violence of their inability to see themselves in Russian politics, the media, or popular culture. It took effort and social collaboration for them to say that they wanted something for themselves rather

⁶E-mail correspondence with Nadieszda Kizenko, July 22, 2010.

⁷See, e.g., Roman (2002), Moodie (2008), Coleman (2009), and Dewey (2009).

than to subscribe to a collective good not of their choosing. They became part of fluid networks of people joined not by common local origin, kinship, or even class but rather the development of a diffuse body of knowledge concerning self-development and its wider implications.

Yet the question remains: did these women present meaningful opposition to gender inequalities in contemporary Russia? My informants brought wider Russian trends of individuation and fragmentation at the level of households a step further in that they focused first on themselves, not on their families. On the surface, these changes suggested a general depoliticization of everyday life—citizens' indifference to or cynicism about structural approaches to change or their lack of acknowledgment that problems such as unemployment had systemic bases to begin with.

However, my work also locates the political in everyday, individuated practices: in a neoliberal order that favors some groups while neglecting others, women's efforts to craft more ambitious, optimistic, and assertive selves were arguably profoundly political. They undermined a political order that was both interventionist in its gender politics and negligent of non-conformists. Women did not want their interests circumscribed by someone else, whether contemporary political institutions or foreign feminist groups, with their definitions of women's identities and interests. Naisargi Dave (2010) posits that any process whereby a group defines its identity and principles involves loss—the marginalization of certain people and practices. Togetherness through idioms of individualism mitigated this loss and the classist and gendered implications of certain forms of group belonging.

Women's capacities for self-imagination nevertheless went only so far without the wider social conditions that would have made more ambitious lives possible for them. We should not lose sight of how cynically individualized approaches reflected on Russian society and its limited possibilities for women's political engagement. For these Russian women, imagining new, expansive, and ambitious personal futures was radical only in light of uncertain but limited options.

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