Paid and unpaid social work in Russia: Is women’s social work opening up opportunities for empowerment processes?

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Abstract
The article analyses whether social work in Russia can have an empowering effect on the poor, given the survival of hierarchical structure of organizations and women’s responsibility for social welfare. Although state policies promote charity rather than empowerment, this study also discusses to what extent women’s paid and unpaid work could stimulate processes of empowerment through supportive measures that open up possibilities for the poor to engage in changing their own situation. The empirical data are based on interviews with social work specialists, NGO representatives and local politicians in two Russian regions.

Keywords
NGOs, poverty, Russia, social mothers, social work

Introduction
In the 1990s in the aftermath of the perestroika process, the pressure on Russian social welfare provision increased considerably, with reductions in free education, free health and other social services. However, most significantly, the state no longer guaranteed jobs and workplaces were no longer obliged to provide housing, child care and other benefits. These changes have impacted on a wide range of people experiencing poverty. The same vulnerable groups as before are poor (single parents; families with many children; people with disabilities; and pensioners), but new kinds of poverty have emerged with an increase in ‘the working poor’ and those affected by unemployment (Klugman, 1998; Lokshin and Popkin, 1999). The poverty phenomenon has led to increased resources being allocated to social security but also laid the basis for the professionalization of social work (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, 2002).

Resources allocated to poverty relief are, however, insufficient as reflected in the fact that social benefits payments are generally too small to cover basic expenditures. The fact that many people...
living in poverty are employed reflects the imbalance between wages and the cost of living (Rimashevskaia, 2010). It has also been argued that there is no clearly formulated state policy for combating poverty and that support is seen as a form of compensation for increased costs (Round and Kosterina, 2005). An increasing number of women’s organizations in the 1990s reflected concerns about the lack of an adequate ‘safety net’. However, from the beginning of the 21st century, the number of voluntary organizations started to decline in the face of decreased Western funding and increased state control over non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Salmenniemi, 2008). Along with the decentralization of social policy to regions, it is also now increasingly the responsibility of regional and local bodies to find their own ways to deal with problems of poverty.

After a section outlining the theoretical and research basis for this article, the following sections highlight aspects related to the role of NGOs in social work in Russia; the interrelation between hierarchical structures and informal decision-making with respect to social work; and the effect of the surviving responsibility of women being ‘social mothers’, before conclusions are drawn.

**Theoretical and research basis**

This article analyses how social work in Russia can have an empowering effect on poor women. The analytical framework is based on North’s (1990) categorization of four main kinds of institutions which influence the way a society develops: legal rules; organization forms; enforcement; and behavioural norms. ‘Institutions’ are all the restrictions that humans have created to regulate interaction in society. While formal rules can be changed by political decisions, informal rules, such as behavioural norms that are rooted in society, are not quickly changed.

Although North (1990) highlighted the need for ‘agency’ (action) for change, he did not incorporate the interrelationship between agency and the institutional framework. In this article the agency dimension is added, drawing on Sen’s (1984) capability approach. Sen’s analytical framework also connects agency to the issue of empowerment, and seeks not only to answer the actual needs for a resource (e.g. money, housing), but also to identify the kind of support needed to transform resources into goods and services (Sen, 1984). This requires agency on the part of those receiving social benefits based on individual perceptions of what they need. The core of the empowerment concept lies in the ability of the individual to control her own destiny, that is, the agency aspect. Agency represents people’s ability to act on behalf of goals that matter to them. Sen (1984) argues that this aspect of freedom is a vital ingredient of social change. This article analyses the role of social workers working in social welfare departments in promoting agency and empowerment in two Russian regions.

The article also discusses the relationship between social NGOs and social work, given the assumption that resources of social welfare agencies are insufficient relative to needs. The aim is therefore also to identify when and how social NGOs can contribute to empowering processes involving poor people. The impact of two kinds of informal institutions are highlighted, first, the survival of a general hierarchical structure of organizations from the Soviet era (in both municipal agencies and NGOs), and second, the survival of the norm that women are responsible for the organization of social welfare. It is suggested that, while the first could provide an obstacle to collaboration, the second norm could promote cooperation across organizations. The aim is to highlight the importance of agency as a means for change, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of the institutional framework: the agency of both people in poverty and those engaged in social work are discussed.

The theoretical analysis is complemented by arguments and findings based on research in two Russian regions including observations and interviews conducted between 2002 and 2012 in three
communities in Archangelsk oblast. Interviews with politicians at the community level and their counterparts at the lowest political level on their experiences of and views on local social welfare issues in post-Soviet Russia have been drawn on. (The communities in which the study was carried out have not been specified to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.)

In addition, the article draws on a two-stage research project on ‘Participatory Approaches to Poverty Reduction’, which included interviews in the city of Nizhny Novgorod in 2010 and in Nizhegorodskaya oblast in November 2011. The interviews were conducted with local residents and families experiencing poverty; professionals from local social welfare departments; leaders of charitable and other voluntary bodies; and representatives of the local administration.

The state and social NGOs

Although it is possible to argue that the state has deliberately chosen not to see poverty as a problem (Round, 2008; Round and Kosterina, 2005), the introduction in 2005 of the Nations Programmes for Health, Education, Housing and Agriculture (the so-called Presidential Programmes) suggest an increased attention to social policies in Russia.

Other indications are the increased effort to engage people in the ‘third sector’ or socially oriented activities, as promoted by the Federal law No. 40-FZ ‘On socially-oriented NGOs’ (adopted 2010). It could be argued that, rather than increasing tax payments to finance social policy, citizens are ‘encouraged’ to contribute to the fulfilment of social aims in various ways (Obshchestvennaya palata, 2012). First, there are general measures to redirect NGO activities from politics or human rights to social welfare, through new laws regulating the activities of NGOs; tax relief measures; fewer audits and less control. NGOs should contribute to ‘social help’, emphasizing the importance of being an active citizen in the social sphere, that is, a special kind of activism is promoted. Second, there are raised expectations of voluntary work, mainly by women engaged in the social sphere. Third, voluntary contributions to charity by businesses are encouraged on the basis of ethics and moral values, rather than through the use of monetary incentives (Obshchestvennaya palata, 2012).

North (2005) argues that the Soviet experience highlights the wide gap between intentions and outcomes and the fragility of the social order in the process of fundamental economic, political and social change. Samson and Ternaux (2008) go one step further as they argue that Russian reform from above is likely to create a distance between reforms and society, implying that organizations are moving within this broad gap. In the gap between the leadership’s decisions about reforms and setting new formal rules, and the ideology, values and attitudes present in society, organizations develop their own strategies for operation. In this article the focus is on how governmental as well as non-governmental social work organizations can use this open space to develop informal solutions across formal and informal organizations. By highlighting the aspect of agency, social work could contribute to strengthening empowerment through supportive measures that open up possibilities for people in poverty to engage actively in changing their own situation.

There are various theories about the non-governmental sector, including suggestions that its development is related to the size of the state sector. Salamon and Anheier (1998) review and analyse five economic theories aimed at explaining patterns of non-profit development with the help of empirical data from eight different countries. The five theories are i) government failure/market failure theory; ii) trust theories; iii) welfare state theory; iv) supply side theory and v) interdependence theory. An attempt is made here to highlight ways in which these theories help explain the development of NGOs in Russia. The focus in Salamon and Anheier (1998) is on the non-profit sector, and the definition of this concept resembles the criteria used in Vivet and Thiry (2000) to
describe the social economy. One important difference, however, is that the user perspective is lacking in the definition of the non-profit sector. While the non-profit concept is widely used in the Anglo-Saxon context, the social economy concept has gained recognition in the European Union, reflecting the principle that decisions should be made at grass roots level (‘bottom-up’). In this article both top-down and bottom-up initiatives are included, since, in the Russian context, both registered NGOs (e.g. women’s councils) and non-governmental actors who collaborate for a common aim without being registered (e.g. mothers with many children) are evident.

**Filling a gap?**

Welfare state theory assumes that the market and the state develop hand in hand. In this line of thinking the expansion of the state is a by-product of economic development. Accordingly, there may be a relationship between weak economic development in Russia along with limited resources for social welfare provided by the state in the 1990s, and the growing number of NGOs that emerged during the same period. As the economy weakens and as the public sector provision is also cut back for economic reasons, the NGO sector expands to compensate for this. The NGO sector would thus have a stabilizing function, reducing (through various activities) the effects of downward trends in the economy.

The starting point for the government failure/market failure theory, which sees NGOs as a substitute for the state and the private sector, is the inherent limitation in the market’s inability to supply public goods. Possibly, this theory could explain the fall in NGOs in 2005–2009 reported by Goskomstat as an effect of the launching of the Nations Programmes for social welfare at this time.

Trust theories find the source of non-governmental activities in the failure of contracts. According to this theory, the scale of the NGO sector varies inversely with the level of trust in the state as well as in the business sector. Actors carry out activities filling up an empty space due to the lack of a viable supply by the state and private sectors. The aim would thus be to collaborate to secure the supply of social services that would not be provided otherwise. The cost is kept down by unpaid work. Trust theories could explain a high participation in informally arranged activities in Russia: it is reported that 67 percent of Russians participate in informal voluntary activities (Obshchestvennaya palata, 2012). In terms of this research, interviewees gave the impression that benefit recipients do not think about the possibility of going to an NGO, with some expressing a lack of trust in NGOs. One example is an aid-seeking woman who says that she would rather go to ‘United Russia’ (Putin’s party) for help than to an NGO (interview, Nizhny Novgorod, July 2010). In the Russian case, low faith in formal NGOs might, however, indicate a low level of trust in formal organizations in general, regardless of whether these are governmental, non-governmental or private. This suggestion is supported by a survey from two small Russian towns in Nizhgorodsky oblast, where a low level of faith in the state’s ability to solve social problems was indicated – but similarly there was a lack of trust in NGOs and private organizations (Ivashinenko, 2012). This is compatible with earlier research findings on how previous collaborative thinking (imposed from above) led to mistrust in the official institutions of co-operation (Ashwin, 1998).

It could be argued that these theories contribute to our understanding of the development of NGOs as a way to fill an empty space in Russia in the 1990s following the breakdown of the Soviet welfare system. Earlier research acknowledges that NGOs were formed in order to address social, political, and economic problems at this time (Cook and Vinogradova, 2006; Hemment, 2007; Kay, 2000; Sperling, 1999; White, 1993). Many of these addressed problems of poverty, for example, through distribution of food in rural areas (Sätre, 2000). These theories could also shed some light on initiatives to set up NGOs by ordinary people a decade later (Sätre et al., 2012).
Who wants to start an NGO?

Supply-side theories focus on the necessary presence of social actors (Salamon and Anheier, 1998). It is not enough that the private and state sectors are weak: someone else has to do something. The theory highlights the actor’s importance, both with respect to what the actor does and in what environment actions are best undertaken. It seems reasonable to assume that Soviet-type systems were not conducive to the development of bottom-up, empowering civil organizing (Rose, 1996) and such tendencies are still apparent in today’s Russian society. NGOs aimed at assisting poor people are often formed through top-down rather than bottom-up initiatives, and reflect a charitable rather than an empowering philosophy (Crotty, 2009). This tendency is illustrated by an NGO representative:

NGOs are dealing with emergency help rather than empowering self-help strategies and the creation of networks.
(The chairman of an association for mothers with many children, Nizhny Novgorod, September 2010)

The research provided examples of individual entrepreneurs setting up charitable funds themselves, as well as examples of individuals mobilizing private entrepreneurs to provide support to NGOs. One example from a small town concerns an elderly woman who ‘didn’t want to crawl to the social services when she became handicapped as a result of polio’ (Nizhegorodskaya oblast, November 2011). Relying on her former position as a leader from the communist era and later, she turned to a friend who had become one of the most important entrepreneurs in the town suggesting the formation of a charity fund. Based on donations from three important local entrepreneurs the charity fund was set up in 2004, and the woman who took the initiative was employed and put in charge. In 2011 there were two more employees. While some permanent funding was granted, the woman in charge reported that she had a list of local entrepreneurs whom she contacted when she needed support for particular projects. She took the decisions on her own about what projects to run, and how she got funding from the entrepreneurs, and on some occasions also support from the local administration, as well as from ordinary citizens. This particular example highlights how trust might be connected to a particular person in charge rather than to the organization as such.

There are also examples of NGOs which actively work for changes in existing rules by lobbying for policy change. The chairperson of the association for mothers with many children described how she struggles for better child care benefits and suggests that mothers with many children should have a ‘work book’ and be regarded as employees with a guaranteed wage for taking care of children in parity with social workers, teachers and psychologists. Another example is the leader of a public organization for helping families affected by domestic violence who works for stronger legislation in this field. She emphasized the interrelation between violence and poverty and suggested that ‘empowering women could reduce poverty’ (Nizhny Novgorod, August 2010). Such examples also draw attention to the fact that there is not always a clear borderline between human rights issues and the activities of NGOs: policies to support socially oriented organizations might also have an impact on human rights.

Our research identified initiatives taken by individuals (e.g. a former workplace leader; an entrepreneur, a local politician) and provided evidence of the initial stages of empowering processes. However, the development and outcomes of such initiatives depended on the contexts in which they were undertaken. Where mechanisms for supporting new ventures or dialogue were lacking, such initiatives could end up as single events, before there was time for them to take root.

Collaboration between individuals

In the survey from the two Russian towns, only 2 percent of ordinary citizens said they might consider taking initiatives to start some common activity, although a substantially larger
proportion were prepared to engage in charity. Even the poorest people would give what they could in emergency situations without becoming involved, rather than take part in cooperative ventures.

Interviews showed that none of the benefit recipients mentioned the possibility of initiating common actions with individuals with similar needs. They did not get such advice from relatives or friends, nor did they know about such experiences in the locality or in a general sense. Furthermore, they didn’t consider the possibility of applying for grants for starting networks or groups. However, to what extent is it realistic to expect people in poverty to take such initiatives? As an aid-seeking mother with many children puts it, they ‘don’t have any time for (engaging in) such activities’. So who might be likely to take the initiative to start a network (Clarke, 1999)? The route into poverty might, for instance, make a difference (Shireen, 2004).

Nevertheless, as some interviewees revealed, they received informal support from other sources than the official ones and their informal networks are important sources of information about entitlements and services – the idea of using a network for helping themselves is already in evidence. There is, for example, a tendency to use new networks of mutual social support based, not so much on the principles of remote kinship community, but more on friendship and common interests. This tendency is characteristic of some younger people who share the same life experience, such as those who were raised in orphanages or who are mothers with many children:

I receive material assistance from friends, less from other organizations, but I can’t give percentages. (Female benefit recipient, single mother, raised in an orphanage, Nizhny Novgorod, July 2010)

Some respondents gave examples of how NGOs serve as network centres:

This elementary swapping of kids’ clothes for example. . . this is the simplest example. Then if somebody has an appointment with social services or has to queue somewhere else, they don’t have anybody with whom they can leave their children. So who will help? For example, relatives won’t help all the time as they work. So their acquaintances who are also mothers with many children help – a couple more kids won’t make a difference. (Mother with many children, Nizhny Novgorod, September 2010)

Both a mother with many children and an NGO representative mention the ‘House of Friendship’ in the neighbourhood where families come to exchange clothes and toys. They give material help as well as advice and they provide a building, situated close to the hospital, where people can meet.

The benefit recipients interviewed in Archangelsk had never heard of any NGOs (interviews with single mothers, May 2011 and October 2012), but, in general, efforts to increase voluntary work (and/or popularize the third sector) seem to have increased knowledge about NGOs. The number of people who had never heard about NGOs decreased from 54 percent in 2004 to 44 percent in 2012 (Obshchestvennaya palata, 2012). One effect is that Russians more often know about self-help groups and groups for helping socially vulnerable people.

Statistics show that in 2012, 18 percent of the population participated in societal organizations such as trade unions, gardening clubs and housing associations, indicating an increased participation in groups that coordinate activities that might improve life quality (Obshchestvennaya palata, 2012). One important factor is the openness towards collaborating with others with similar needs, that is, some people are prepared to cooperate not only with relatives and close friends but also with others to fulfil a common need:

There is a collective attitude between neighbours, there exists an ‘everybody helping each other’ mentality. Some of them come to the NGO to ask for help on behalf of a neighbour. (Nizhny Novgorod, August 2010)
NGO leaders are themselves examples of mothers who are capable of helping themselves and others out of poverty. Some of them have experiences of working in NGOs or in the social sphere. Among these there are examples of how individuals teach each other methods of coping with poverty, such as sewing (Ivashinenko, 2012). It appears that, in the Russian case, local initiatives of cooperation with others in a similar life situation are more about coping than actually about realizing agency for changing a particular situation. Another observation is that those who collaborate with each other are not necessarily the most vulnerable, but are more likely to be those who are marginally above the poverty line.

**Cooperation between NGOs and social welfare services**

Salamon and Anheier (1998) suggest that the non-profit sector and the state are dependent on each other. They argue that non-profit organizations are often active in a field before government can be mobilized to respond. NGOs are therefore likely to develop expertise, structures and experience that governments can make use of. Interviews did reveal examples of such interrelationships. The development of some of the larger NGOs with roots from the Soviet period, such as the non-governmental organizations ‘For Deaf and Blind’ and ‘For the Disabled’, provide an example (interview, Archangelsk, October 2012). Interviews with social workers have revealed that they are dependent on NGOs in different ways. Some social workers stated that they are dependent on voluntary unpaid work, while others emphasize the role of donors. For instance, there are examples of how NGOs keep storages facilities where sponsors come with sugar, rice and flour. Voluntary workers collect the donated goods and make parcels which are then delivered to single mothers who have children with disabilities (Obshchestvennaya palata, 2012). There are also social shops (run with the help of voluntary workers) where prices are lower.

Some forms of cooperation between NGOs and social welfare offices were mentioned in interviews, for example, when a mother was admitted to hospital for an operation, her children were taken care of by the authorities, but an NGO representative helped to find relatives who could collect the children (interview, Nizhny Novgorod, September 2010).

It appears, however, that there are no formal structures for collaboration, and therefore no regular means of cooperation. On the contrary, cooperation between NGOs and social services appears to be based on personal contacts or on ad-hoc agreements. When something happens, resources are mobilized to meet the particular emergency situation. In other situations, if a philanthropist makes a donation of money or an investment, the donor simply decides what the money should be used for, such as building a church or a children’s home. Interviews also revealed that some NGOs felt that the social welfare department supported their efforts. Such support could be through the provision of an office or assistance with electricity and a telephone.

Others emphasized how they performed the job that the social welfare office staff have been unable to do, for instance, there were examples of how parents have mobilized other parents to undertake voluntary work after social services had failed to do this. Some respondents also spoke about unpaid work carried out by pensioners, helping to make parcels to distribute to poor people for New Year’s celebrations. However, one social worker mentioned that the pensioners are paid for their efforts if the organization can get a grant for this work, indicating that she thinks this is the way it should be.

Although there are some indications of increased cooperation between the NGOs and the state which could be taken as a sign of improved partnerships (Salmenniemi, 2008), decreased Western funding and increased control from above (as manifested in new legislation in 2006 and again in 2012), suggest that it has become more difficult for bottom-up initiatives to provide social services, given that they are not likely to get support from the state (Tarasenko, 2012).
Hierarchical structures and informal decision-making

Respondents gave the impression that social workers from municipal services try to comply with the legal framework and that they follow directives from higher levels. One consequence is that they devote most of their time to categorizing people with the help of more or less sophisticated calculations of what people are entitled to, rather than helping people change their situations. In just obeying instructions from above, they can influence the allocation of help, but not its content. In this situation they have little chance to devise alternative solutions about how to organize their work. Nevertheless, interviews indicated that social workers might be prepared to take initiatives to achieve better outcomes. Some of them have ideas on how to empower poor people, but there are constraints on their own agency and capability (Sätre et al., 2012).

The construction of the social welfare system (based on formal hierarchies of decision-making in relation to special categories of benefits recipients) supports the views expressed in interviews, specifically that officials have difficulties discussing with benefits recipients their own ideas about how a particular form of support could be used. This argument is compatible with earlier research. Round (2004), Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov (2012) and Yaroshenko (2010) provide evidence of how social workers actually make their own judgements about whom to support, taking into account the inadequate resources they have at their disposal.

Some interviews reflected desperate attempts to cope with a difficult job where resources are inadequate to support those who are entitled to it. For instance, one respondent said she tried to help disabled people and disadvantaged families she visited to change their life situations, but this was only in her free time (interview with a social worker, Archangelsk, May 2012). The resemblance to situations in the Soviet system of having to deal with impossible tasks by means of informal solutions is apparent and seems logical.

Social mothers: Combining paid and unpaid work at the local level

Decentralization has meant that responsibility for development of social welfare services was transferred to the very local level, although without adequate resources (Thiessen, 2006; Wengle and Rasell, 2008). The difficulties concerning the implementation of the new laws are reflected in interviews with a vice-mayor in one of the communities, who suggested that mechanisms are lacking for the development of effective services (Sätre, 2013).

When I asked the vice-mayor about collaboration between the local administration, social workers and NGOs, she called in five women, who represent NGOs with roots from the Soviet time. As one respondent put it: ‘As the state cannot apply for funding from the national programmes, we have to mobilize the NGOs. This is facilitated by working in the villages, where everybody knows each other; the same people are involved in all the NGOs’ (interview, village, Archangelsk region, May 2011).

It is interesting to see the links between women’s different roles. As noted, women are generally responsible for social issues at higher as well as at lower political levels (Moses, 2008). The same women are sometimes also the chairpersons in the women’s councils which are registered NGOs, although they are not examples of bottom-up organizations. Kulmala (2010) and Phillips (2005) have observed that many of the organizational skills evident in NGOs were developed from women’s experiences in Soviet organizations. In this research the region’s vice-chairperson in the duma, a woman, was also the chairperson of the regional women’s council. Similarly, the vice-mayor was chairperson of the community women’s council. It was clear that she would replace the former vice-mayor in both these positions automatically when the latter retired. This indicates that the same women are in charge of the formal state authorities, where they have access to both formal
networks and the political hierarchical structures and to the informal networks through the women’s councils (interviews with three female politicians at the lowest level of political administration, Archangelsk oblast, October 2008). This implies a blurring of responsibilities, of roles and of tasks, so that it is difficult to see where the state’s responsibility ends and the voluntary sector takes over (Kay, 2011).

Conclusions

Interviews from two Russian regions provided evidence of how social workers as well as NGO workers try to ensure that people get the support they are entitled to. The survival of hierarchical structures however indicates that, rather than cooperating, social welfare institutions and NGOs seem to function as two parallel hierarchies of support that do not necessarily reach people most in need. It appears that state policies promote top-down models, with both social welfare offices and NGOs providing charity rather than empowerment. There is thus a risk that those starting NGOs themselves become leaders of hierarchical organizations and that they are the only ones who feel empowered (Phillips, 2005). This also means that it is individual NGO leaders, rather than local female politicians responsible for social affairs, who decide how to distribute social welfare at the local level. Although this study provided only limited evidence of their collaboration, some forms of cooperation between NGOs and social welfare offices were also mentioned. The fact that social workers and NGOs collaborate around traditional tasks, such as festivals, celebrations and charity, might indicate that they are open to collaboration in a broader sense as well.

Although interviews with staff in NGOs often reveal views in line with a top-down perspective, they also reveal a number of views which are compatible with bottom-up initiatives. These staff show an interest in listening directly to the views of poor people, a preparedness for actions for change, and an interest in cooperation (Sätre et al., 2012). This study also provides evidence of how individual social workers as well as NGO workers use their experiences to try to change the rules. Interviews revealed actions of lobbying upwards in the hierarchy as well as attempts to influence legislative rules; and gave examples of how social workers and NGO leaders, as well as ordinary people, express ideas of changing rather than just coping. Learning from their experiences, processes of cooperation and empowering could be promoted. The research however provided little knowledge about the actual processes of empowerment of poor people. There is also a risk that any demand for individual change pushes away claims for social, economic and institutional justice (see Rivkin-Fish, 2005).

Recent pressure from the state to engage social NGOs is compatible with developments at the local level. Women who were used to finding informal solutions to problems during the Soviet period continue to find ways to secure survival in post-Soviet Russia through their unpaid voluntary work (in addition to paid work). Local authorities are intertwined with traditional organizations, such as women’s councils and veteran’s councils, which are officially registered as NGOs (Kuimlma, 2010; Sätre, 2012). Charity organizations are engaged in helping homeless children and young criminals, and also, to some extent in ‘bottom-up projects’, such as helping individuals or groups with funds to start up various activities (Sätre, 2007).

Returning to the role of institutions, social work through women’s paid and unpaid work resulted from the non-priority status of social issues in the Soviet system. A combination of different strategies is important to overcome different kinds of deficiencies arising in the processes of transformation and decentralization in post-Soviet Russia, during which various combinations of women’s formal and informal organizations have survived. Women continue to carry significant responsibilities for organizing social welfare within society, as well as for empowering voluntary work, given the gendered nature of the responsibility for social work in both state and non-state contexts.
It would appear that their responsibilities are also concerned with how to improve life conditions in a general sense, perhaps directed towards certain groups, for example, young people, unemployed adults, families with many children (Sätre, 2013).

Although social policy continues to be financed by the state to a major extent, new ways of organizing social welfare can be detected which are opening up opportunities for empowerment processes. There is also a risk, however, that the state places too much reliance on women’s unpaid work, while it is effectively relieved of responsibilities which many believe should be borne by the state.

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**Notes**

1. This article is based on several research projects carried out in Russia. Among these I would especially like to mention the project on poverty conducted in Nizhny Novgorod 2010-2012 with researchers from Nizhny Novgorod State University (NNGU), Nizhny Novgorod Scientific Research Centre for Economics, Society and Science (EON), Glasgow University and Uppsala University. I would like to express special thanks to Elena R. Iarskaia-Smith, Karen Lyons, Leo Granberg and the two anonymous referees for their comments. Any omissions or errors are the sole responsibility of the author.

2. According to Vivet and Thiry (2000), the generally accepted criteria for describing the social economy are: a) the object of providing a service to members (common or mutual interest) or the community (general interest), b) the primacy of people over capital, c) democratic functioning and d) a management system which is independent of the public authorities (Vivet and Thiry, 2000: 11).

**References**


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