

The whole hope in the Hope. Women's movement in Belarus

Introduction

The first women's organisations in Belarus were established at the end of the 19th century as offshoots of women's societies in Russia. They differed from their Russian counterparts though, since they combined the fight for equal rights of women with the Belarusian national movement's revival ideas.

With the declaration of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) and establishment of Soviet rule, the situation of the Belarusian women's movement changed dramatically. The declaration of equal rights for men and women was reflected in the state and party governing bodies. The policy of women's emancipation assumed a distinct class character, subordinated to the interest and tasks of the state.

Although the Soviet authorities granted women a number of rights and privileges, the policy of emancipation was not in fact aimed at changing the patriarchal social consciousness, without which a complete social-ontological equality of rights is not possible. Resulting from these actions was latent discrimination against women and a "double strain." The manner of presentation and the content of the "women's issues" resulted from the tasks of a given stage of communism, and not from the interests of women themselves. Also, the feminisation of the low-paid branches of national economy followed, which as a matter of fact has not been overcome yet. The Soviet Women's Committee was the only women's organisation functioning in the USSR (including Belarus) with tens of millions of members. Yet, its activities were under the strict control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

Nowadays, two periods in the history of Belarusian women's organisations development can be distinguished. The first is in the 1990s, when independent non-governmental women's organisations were established on the rising tide of democratic movement in large districts and industrial towns. All women's NGOs aimed at defending women's rights and interests were trying to find their own areas of activity, such as solving problems related to women's work and living conditions, environmental issues, development of Belarusian language and culture, revival of national traditions, protection of maternity and childhood. The "Hope" party was established in 1994 to increase the influence of women on politics.

The second half of the 1990s is characterised by the active response of state to the social-economic needs of women, compulsory organisation of social associations in all regions and involving women in adopting the state policy for equal status of men and women.

The social activity of women in Belarus is manifested mostly as a women's movement, not as a feminist movement. It can be divided by the following criteria:

1. Status of the social associations;
2. Political position of the leader with regard to the state authority;
3. The sphere and character of activity.

Based on the first criterion, international, national, and local organisations can be distinguished in Belarus. The second category includes opposition, pro-government, and neutral organisations, while the third refers to institutions with social-economic, national-democratic, science-research, and professional focuses. Besides women's issues, the organisations embark upon the wider issues of human rights, comprise counselling, education, and information forums, and carry on cultural and philanthropic activities. Their main scope of interest is in the problems related to women's low social status, insufficient participation in decision making circles, unemployment and poverty among women, domestic violence, and the effect of the disaster in Chernobyl. The analysis of women's NGOs policy documents suggests that most of them subscribe to the social democratic ideas and rules.

When faced with the need to survive in the reality of the authoritarian regime, economic crisis and environmental problems, values such as development of personality, independence, and emancipation are forced to the background and remain interesting only from a theoretical standpoint. They also cannot count on grasping the interest of people who expect the social movement to improve their practical situation. Therefore, a substantial number of women's organisations focus not only on the problems related to equality of rights, but also strive to provide concrete social support through philanthropic activities targeted at the poorest citizens.

Even though independent women's organisations have managed to gather some experience and skills, and gain recognition and authority in the women's issues, it cannot be called a mass movement that would be able to influence the social development and political decision making.

Functioning conditions

The NGOs in Belarus function under conditions of a repressive regime. Registering an NGO is a difficult and expensive process, with a high likelihood of rejection. As far as women's NGOs

are concerned, the state applies a selective policy depending on the level of loyalty towards the authorities. Attempts at political manipulation, control, and directing of women's activities by the state are noticeable. State authorities, from the ministry of justice to tax offices, have the right to control the NGOs' activities, often without prior notice. Additionally, the organisations' authorities are obliged to provide regular information about their members and the structure of their institutions to judicial institutions. Constant rises in rent fees, lease terminations, calling the representatives of the organisations to propaganda offices, and even to the KGB, job dismissals or threats, are common methods of intimidating the NGOs' members, creating alleged reasons for sanctions, or suspending the organisations' activities.

Restrictive regulations related to NGOs passed in recent years make it difficult to perform any kind of social associations' activities. For it is a very rare occasion to receive a permit for a picket, gathering, or rally, and no space is rented out for mass events. As a result, the number of independent NGOs is decreasing, while strict controls and repressive measures are a serious obstacle for the participation of women in associations focusing on the current social problems. Moreover, there were numerous cases when an NGO was disbanded for a minor excuse, which was, so to speak, a form of punishment for holding a standpoint other than the officially endorsed. Over twenty NGOs, including women's organisations, were closed down in 2003 only, and in 2007 a decision was made to disband the "Hope" party due to its excessive political activity (the decision to liquidate a party can be appealed within three years; the liquidation process is not finished yet).

Political parties and social organisations, conscious of the injustice and of arbitrary character of decisions of their liquidation, continue to find ways of functioning. One of which is to register a social association as an international organisation in other countries. Furthermore, there are many citizen initiatives and organisation committees in Belarus, but according to Belarusian law, acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation carries serious consequences, including imprisonment.

The atmosphere of repression makes it difficult to subsidise the organisations, as there is no progressive policy of tax reliefs for potential national sponsors, which would allow finding internal resources for the development of the third sector. The policy of awarding state grants by tenders for realisation of citizen initiatives was also unsuccessful. Because of that, the real source of financing for associations' programmes and projects is in the contributions and subsidies of their members, as well as funds from international and foreign foundations and organisations. The latter are under state control, and to receive them an organisation has to

obtain a permit from the propaganda office. State social associations are financed entirely by the state.

In order for the situation to change, the state authorities have to warrant equal rights and conditions for all social subjects. First, the repressions against members of political parties and social associations have to be halted, as well as the forced liquidation of organisations for trivial reasons, which violates the human right of “freedom of association”. Further steps to improve the situation should go in the direction of liberalisation of regulations on political parties and social associations, and the repealing of Presidential decrees which are at variance with the constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Field of activity

When at the beginning of 21st century the women’s movement in Belarus structured themselves, the most effective organisations emerged, which defined the scope of their activities. The “Hope” party, for instance, focused on the problem of women’s participation in politics, preparation and proposal of candidacies for deputies and the St. Eufrasinya Polotskaya International Women’s Fund deals with issues related to culture and the revival of national traditions. White slave trade issues are also a priority for the Young Women’s Christian Association of Belarus, while social and human rights issues are solved by the Belarusian Organisation of Working Women. The Women’s Independent Democratic Movement has become the most prominent organisation popularising citizen’s political, and economic competence as well as the theory of equal status for men and women. Generally speaking, the scope of interest of Belarusian women’s organisations covers all urgent problems of the present.

However, the women’s movement in Belarus is not homogenous or monolithic. Numerous organisations have different views on their vocation, the place of women in society, and represent various political orientations. Large numbers of the organisations follow the paternalist current, demanding from the state to provide help for women. The most progressive NGOs build their activities within the context of modern interpretation of women’s rights and their equal status. Yet, both of these premises are important and necessary elements of women NGOs’ activity.

According to the Kiev NDI office analysis, the women’s organisations should concentrate on the following social needs:

- Family life education;

- Unemployment among women;
- Preventing domestic violence and white slavery;
- Social activation of women, engaging in the decision-making processes;
- Lifelong learning through training, seminars, professional and general knowledge meetings;
- Implementation of legislative changes, including the “budget for the equal status of men and women”, which will warrant equal payment for both genders.

The “Hope” party conducted sociological research in 2008 on a group of 1,500 women from all regions, to define what constitutes the basic problems for women. The analysis revealed that family well-being is the most important issue for women. The most urgent problems are the housing deficit, inadequate medical care and access to higher education. Among further problems are women and children’s health. The hierarchy of problems included “contract working” on the 10th position, “low paid jobs” on the 16th, and “unequal promotion prospects” on the 35th. Sexual harassment at work was on the last position.

Women’s organisations, while planning their activities, consider the public opinion. Therefore, the educational activity of NGOs focuses on increasing women’s competitiveness in the professional, political and social life. Seminars and training in interpersonal skills that help defeat the lack of self-confidence and strengthen self-assessment are very helpful in achieving that goal. Women learn the basics of enterprise, a particularly valuable feature on the work market. Members of the NGOs organise mutual assistance to learn modern computer technologies, foreign languages, and office administration. In numerous cases the NGOs operate on voluntary work, which proves women’s high interest in joint undertakings. The “Hope” party, the Women’s Independent Democratic Movement, and Women’s Network of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions have numerous branches and operate in all large agglomerations and in many regional towns. However, due to the lack of financial resources, not all women that are ready to get involved have the ability to participate in NGO activities. The participation in any seminar is determined by way of competition. It is now common for women who have taken part in even minor training, to share their new experience with friends and acquaintances, thus making the new ideas and knowledge more common. Those women who have participated in NGO activities try to keep in touch with their organisations despite all the changes in their lives.

The fact that during the election, volunteers had no problem in gathering the necessary 1,000 signatures for each woman’s candidacy, proves the high standing and potential of politically active women. Belarusians are then ready to accept women in the highest authorities, but owing to the rigged elections, the true election results remain unknown.

State authorities were eventually forced to listen to the opinions of social women's organisations and in September 2008 "the National Action Plan for promoting gender equality in 2008 – 2010" was adopted. Its preamble underlines that the development of women's movement has had a positive impact on the growth of women's social status. The state declares the necessity to broaden the social partnership between women's NGOs and state authorities, exchange information and cooperate with foreign women's organisations. Such intentions can only be applauded. Yet, there is a danger that the authorities will only collaborate with semi-governmental organisations that merely imitate the activities needed to fulfil the needs of the female part of Belarusian society.

Bearing in mind that the principal condition for a change in women's situation is the development of democracy and observance of human rights, progressive women's organisations collaborate with the democratic opposition. The "Hope" party is a member of the United Democratic Forces of Belarus, and takes part in undertakings, both in Minsk and in the districts. Many of the NGO leaders are members of various opposition parties. Groups of women in political parties cooperate, understanding the need to join in their cause. To coordinate their activities and conduct joint solidarity actions they have appointed a "round-table."

Collaboration and organisation network

Participants in the democratic movement in Belarus are conscious of the fact that building partnerships strengthens the organisations and their social influence. Cooperation between women's NGOs and initiative groups has recently become more pronounced. A cooperation agreement was worked out within the network of women's organisations, which includes joint solidarity activities in the form of mass actions. There were coordinated activities realised during the presidential campaign and parliamentary election in 2007. The activities of the women's coalition proved successful in the National Action Plan for promoting gender equality in the 2008 – 2010 promotional campaign. Members of the coalition are trained in the basics of women's rights and equal rights policy. But these are only the first steps towards a broader activity.

The development, or even the existence, of women's organisations in Belarus would not be possible without partner relations with European and international women's movements. Representatives of various women's organisations participate in many international meetings, are members of various women's coalitions, and utilise materials developed by the world

community. The experiences of European women in the struggle for their rights and equal status, and their support for Belarusian associations are of invaluable importance. Unfortunately, systematising the contacts with foreign organisations is not possible, since each organisation has its own links to their foreign partners.

Perspectives

The most progressive forces in the women's movement are aware that in order to influence politics and promote women, the women's organisations have to consolidate their organisational and ideological forces, speak as a broad front and gain social support. The women's movement can become one of the most honest and efficient forces that cares about a modern system in Belarus, creation of civil society and a democratic state. The women's movement should continue to develop and shape as a self-reliant and independent social force, stand in constructive opposition to the existing authorities, and build partnerships with all sectors of civil society.

In order to increase the influence of women's movement it is necessary to:

- Coordinate human, technological, information and intellectual resources worked out by individual women's organisations;
- Create a broad democratic coalition of independent women's organisations, which will be attractive to new groups of women and individual members;
- Work out and agree on common ideological platform, strategic aims, and work methodology of women's movement;
- Establish an intellectual, methodological and organisational centre for the independent women's movement in Belarus that will integrate and further develop the gathered potential.

The further success of the women's movement will depend on their ability to showcase and defend the interests of various categories of women, to influence the shape of state policy, to define the strategy of relations with authorities, political parties, and social associations. The still unutilised potential of women and their readiness to take responsibility, makes it possible to work out a new system of values and development priorities.

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