Reading Rabotnitsa: Gender in a Socialist Economy

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15656/gender/v04/GCB-04

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Since the 1970s, American feminism has insisted upon a necessary connection between capitalism, consumer culture, and the oppression of women. Consumer researchers with feminist sympathies, therefore, are presented with contradiction between political beliefs and daily work. The path to reconciliation of feminism and marketing is comparative research. As some studies of comparative cases show, women have been oppressed in all documented societies, regardless of political system. The most obvious case for comparison—the ideological "torture case," as it were—would be the history of women under the former Soviet Union. While complete comparative investigation of women and consumption in the USSR is beyond the scope of this paper, it illustrated the potential for such questioning by analyzing Rabotnitsa ["Woman Worker"], the leading woman's magazine under the Soviet Union. The uniqueness of Rabotnitsa is in its continuity—it started in 1914, before the Russian Revolution, and still endures after dissemination of the Soviet Union. Though the agency which administered Rabotnitsa has changed from time to time, its essential goal was always the same: the political and ideological education of Soviet women. The paper studies shifts in ideology and content that occurred at known periods of change in either policy or leadership within the Communist party. The study focuses on five key issues, because of their centrality to the feminist critique of capitalism: the role of production versus consumption, questions of family, femininity, sexuality, and political participation. The study suggests that although the Soviet Union created an economic system and ideology vastly different from that of the West, many of the issues that women experienced in both types of societies were very similar. Beauty, grooming, and the consumer behaviors of feminine appearance seem to serve the both systems' ideologies. The fact that feminism, even in Russia, had distinctly bourgeois roots, suggests that consumer culture's role in the oppression of women may not be so one-sided as has been suggested. Attacks on industrialization and modernization are unlikely to be very explanatory in the end. While the situation for women in the US and in the new Russia are still imperfect, to say the least, they still set a standard for the rest of the world. Perhaps, the researchers should focus on similarities rather than differences between these two economic systems.