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CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES IN PATTERNS OF GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EVIDENCE FROM THE RUSSIAN PUBLIC SECTOR

In response to the first wave of the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Russian federal government introduced several novel regulations, including the transfer to remote work. This article conceptualises the pandemic as an external shock that affected interactions in organisations at both the individual and structural levels. Focusing on female civil servants working in federal executive bodies, this article explores the following questions: what are the features of gender-sensitive processes in the public civil service, and what significant changes have occurred in state bodies after introducing measures in response to the pandemic? To answer this question, we analyse the experience of female civil servants and their perception of the changes that have occurred in the workplace after the spread of coronavirus infection. Using analysis of the in-depth semi-structured interviews and detailed operationalization of Acker's theory on gendered organizations, the article compares gendered processes that have remained unchanged and the ones which have undergone changes after the introduction of measures against COVID-19. Thus, the study's novelty lies in the conclusions on the main patterns and changes in organisational gendered processes in the Russian public sector. The results of this study suggest that despite the persistence of most gendered processes that disadvantage female public servants as well as the emergence of negative outcomes associated with staff redundancies, the administrative reform that promotes increased digitalization might mark the beginning of a shift towards greater gender

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equality and a greater representation of women in decision-making positions in Russian public organisations, at least at the federal level.

Key words: COVID-19, pandemic, theory of gendered organisations, public sector, Russia

DOI: 10.17323/727-0634-2023-21-1-95-106

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, many organisations worldwide had to significantly alter their business practices, introducing measures such as remote work, short-time work, or work in shifts. As has been suggested by multiple reports and studies, women and men have been affected by these changes differently due to pre-existing inequalities in the division of labour both at work and at home (Collins et al. 2021; Nash, Churchill 2020). Some researchers identified an increase in women's unpaid labour at home in absolute terms in Hungary (Fodor et al. 2020) and Iceland (Hjálmsdóttir, Bjarnadóttir 2020), a greater decrease in working hours, and perceived productivity and job satisfaction among mothers compared to fathers in the US (Collins et al. 2021; Feng, Savani 2020; Landivar et al. 2020) and Germany (Czymara et al. 2020) during the periods of lockdown. Some studies have also suggested that in the first half of 2020, women's employment was negatively affected than that of men in Israel (Kristal, Yaish 2020) and Canada (Qian, Fuller 2020), with the latter study finding that less educated mothers with young children were hit the hardest by the pandemic-associated crisis.

While this nascent literature reveals a wide range of implications of the pandemic for gender inequality, we still know little about the ways the pandemic might have changed gender-related processes within organisations. In addressing this gap, we ask what basic gender processes can be identified in public organisations and how these processes changed during the COVID pandemic. Moreover, the introduction of anti-COVID measures in public service organisations in Russia coincided with the implementation of a new administrative reform that was aimed to streamline the sector mainly through the digitalization of most work processes and the reduction in the numbers of employees at different levels. Thus, we use interviews with female public servants working for the federal government in Russia to compare their experiences before and after anti-COVID measures and the public sector reform were introduced. The strongly feminised public sector characterised by a gender pyramid presents an interesting case for analysis with regards to tacit manifestations of gender segregation and inequality in the workplace.

Russian civil service from a gender perspective

In Russia, civil service is a professional activity performed by citizens in agencies of executive, legislative, and judicial authorities at the federal and regional levels. However, employees in the military and law enforcement agencies, as well as in public schools, universities, and hospitals are not considered public

servants. According to the Russian State Statistics Agency (Rosstat 2020), while women make up more than 70% of public servants, this sphere remains male-oriented. That is, female employees tend to concentrate in junior- and mid-level positions, whereas male employees occupy positions at the top administrative level. According to official Civil Service position classification in Russia (Federal Law 2004) we refer to heads (*rukovoditeli*) and assistants (*advisers, pomoshchniki or sovetniki*) as top-level positions, specialists (*specialisty*) as mid-level positions, and support staff (*obespechivayushchie specialisty*) as junior positions. Therefore, despite being numerically overrepresented in the sector, women generally perform work that involves paperwork, processing citizens' requests, preparing materials for meetings, and other routine tasks that have little to no impact on strategic decision-making (e.g., junior- and mid-level positions).

According to the Federal Law FZ-79 'On State Civil Service of the Russian Federation' (2004), one of the basic principles of employment in civil service is 'equal access of citizens who speak the state language of the Russian Federation to civil service and equal conditions for [employees] regardless of [their] gender, race, [and] ethnicity.' The law states that irregular working hours should be kept only by employees who occupy the highest positions in civil service. As a career in civil service presupposes overwork and irregular working hours, women struggle to climb the career ladder because in most Russian families, women continue to be in charge of housework and childcare (Ashwin, Isupova 2014). Such unequal conditions inevitably result in gender segregation.

Many young women choose civil service as it allows them to return to their previous position after maternity leave and offers many administrative roles that are considered naturally suitable for women, for instance, in public health, education, and social protection (Utkina, Gasparyan 2019). Marina Kashina (2009) argues that although social benefits provided to civil service employees allow women to combine motherhood and paid employment, gender stereotypes and a 'double burden' segregate women to low-paid jobs that require service delivery and the provision of care and assistance. A study of strategies employed by female public servants to combine work and family commitments revealed a persistent stereotype regarding the division of labour into 'male tasks' associated with power and responsibility and 'female tasks' that mainly consist of organisational work and assistance provision (Isupova, Utkina 2018). Overall, female public servants do not strive for the highest positions in the organisational hierarchy. However, they do aspire to grow professionally as 'experts in their field' and receive a pay rise (Isupova, Utkina 2018).

Theory and methodology in the analysis of gendered processes in organisations

Joan Acker's idea that organisational culture and work environment are not gender-neutral remains relevant for contemporary research (Acker 1990;

Acker 1992). The main advantage of Acker's theory is that it allows for the consideration of not only macro-processes, but also of practices of interaction in the workplace. Consequently, researchers can trace asymmetric power relations in various aspects of work and organisational processes, such as the use of language, dress code, norms and rules of communication with colleagues, and the perception of the employee's position in the team and organisation. In addition to the measurements of gendered processes based on Acker's theory, it is vital to explore the trajectory of employees' career paths, since the analysis of strategies for transition from lower to higher positions can also reveal gender dynamics in the organisation (van den Brink et al. 2016).

This theory has been used to analyse organisational culture and interaction practices in the field of education (Kantola 2008), economics (Carr 2007), law firms (Phillips 2005; Pierce 1995), and military service (Van Wijk, Finchilescu 2008). For instance, engaging with Acker's idea of organisational logic and using qualitative data, Dana Britton (1997) finds that policies and practices in the US men's and women's prisons, such as personnel training, were formally defined as gender-neutral but construed an ideal correction officer as a masculine figure. While training instructors overemphasised the need to be prepared to deal with violence and hence males were seen as better suited for the job, in practice officers mainly performed custodial and bureaucratic work. Britton (1997: 814) concludes that such supposedly gender-neutral policies and practices maintain sex segregation and reproduce gender inequality. Similarly, Jeni Hart (2016) uses Acker's theory to analyse the barriers and opportunities for promoting female faculty members in STEM at the US research university. The study demonstrates that the interviewed women struggled to meet formally gender-neutral expectations to collaborate with colleagues to get promoted due to the 'gendered subtext' that they were not welcomed in male colleagues' informal networks.

To investigate the transformation of patterns of gendered organisations in response to COVID-19, we account for changes in the components of gendered processes, as per Acker's theory. To develop an interview guide, we focused on the four main components of gender processes that, according to Acker, reproduce gender in organisations: (1) the division of labour and responsibilities between men and women; (2) symbols and images; (3) workplace interaction practices; (4) process of identity construction. These indicators are designed for collecting data using in-depth interviews during which respondents can reflect on their experiences and the situations they describe. In this study, some of these indicators are reconceptualized based on the available research in economic sociology (Waldfogel 1997; Budig, England 2001) and empirical findings on cultural metaphors and values at the workplace (Alvesson, Billing 2009; Pratt, Rafaeli 1997).

The empirical dataset is based on seventeen in-depth semi-structured interviews with female public servants working for the federal government in

Russia. The interviews were collected at different times: ten interviews were conducted before the COVID pandemic and seven interviews after the lockdown was introduced in response to the 'first wave' of the pandemic. We recruited different respondents for the two periods of the interviews to achieve the maximum variation of the sample, controlling for age, place of work (different departments, agencies, ministries), and position (positions are evenly distributed across the empirical sample). Basic strategy for the recruitment process was 'snowball' sampling.

The respondents represented a range of ministries and departments, including the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economic Development, the Federal Taxation Service, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the Ministry of Energy, Gokhran of Russia (The Federal Government Institution State Institution on Formation of the State Fund of Precious Metals and Precious Stones of the Russian Federation, Storage, Release and Use of Precious Metals and Precious Stones), and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. Specific departments in the Ministries include: Department of Civil Service and Personnel of the Government of the Russian Federation and Information Project Preparation Department at the Ministry of Energy. Age range is from 25 to 41. Using the qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews, we aimed to answer the following questions: what gender processes can be identified in public service organisations in Russia? Do the respondents indicate any changes in each of the gender processes? If so, how do they assess these changes? However, we used the same interview guide, except for the questions related to the changes that potentially occurred after the first wave of the pandemic.

While we argue that interviews are a particularly suitable method for identifying and analysing gender processes in public agencies, scholars who use this method to conduct research among civil servants in Russia can encounter specific difficulties when recruiting informants. The main reason is that public servants have to sign non-disclosure agreements (some aspects of government service cannot be shared publicly), which often results in high rates of refusal to participate in an interview, especially if the researcher asks to record the conversation. Therefore, when conducting this study, we received informed consent from the respondents and anonymized the data. We also controlled for social desirability effect by not asking straightforward questions about the correlation between any changes and the pandemic. Out of four gendered processes that we focused on in the study, i.e. identity construction, was the hardest to elucidate during the interviews. None of the respondents connected any specific roles in the workplace or possibilities to change their roles with gender. Consequently, in what follows, we report findings for the three gendered processes: the gender division of labour, symbols and images, and workplace interactions.

Findings

The division of labour

The division of labour between men and women was a gendered process most clearly articulated by the respondents in their narratives. When describing this form of segregation, the respondents drew both on their personal experience and official statistics regarding gender composition of different departments and the distribution of men and women within the organisational hierarchy. For instance, while often expressing a personal belief that public service was equally suitable for men and women, the respondents were aware that certain departments were male- or female-dominated. Horizontal segregation in a particular department may be strictly functional; women perform the main duties assigned to that department, while men work in the security office. Also, based on their personal experiences as well as official statistics, the respondents acknowledged that women occupying top decision-making positions in public service were still a rare occurrence. That is, although men and women can have the same educational background and comparable competences, they will be charged with different responsibilities and occupy different positions in the department.

One of the key indicators of the gender division of labour is the perceived presence of 'male' or 'female' tasks. Although the respondents generally claimed that such a distinction did not exist, they noted that women were assigned tasks associated with routine work, communication, and the provision of support (Isupova, Utkina 2018). For instance, female employees were commonly expected to perform services that were not part of their main responsibilities:

Your leaders are usually men, and you have to perform some of these purely female duties like washing a mug and meeting guests. Or [you have to] be polite. Having to be polite, of course, applies to everyone. But to be super polite [is different]; you have to do it because you have a male superior manager. That is, they force you to do it and force you to adapt to this stereotype about women (Female, 24, Federal Ministry).

The division of labour also manifested in horizontal segregation between different departments. For instance, finance and law departments employ mostly women, although these departments are headed by men, and a department that relates to the coal industry consists mostly of men. The latter example in particular illustrates how horizontal segregation in the labour market may influence gender segregation in public service, i.e. since work related to the coal industry requires specific education and technical knowledge, it is considered more suitable for men.

When asked about instances of gender pay gap, the respondents tended to agree that male or female workers in the same position had equal opportunities to be promoted and receive equal pay. However, some narratives sug-

gested that there was a hidden process of gender discrimination. Men in managerial positions may be provided with more staff or more functional responsibilities than their female counterparts, which will result in a pay gap. The main mechanism through which this type of discrimination operates is gender stereotypes. For instance, one respondent stated that men were more likely to occupy top positions because they were believed to be more trust-worthy and have strategic planning ability, while women were viewed as emotional and hence unsuitable for leadership. Thus, gender stereotypes or double standards can perpetuate gender inequality even in public organisations where decision-makers' discretion is expected to be limited by formal rules and procedures.

Symbols and images

One of the most prominent images that served to reinforce the gendered division of labour was the association of paid employment with male employees and family responsibilities with female employees. For instance, one respondent quoted her manager as stating that *'civic and public duty is everything for a man, [and] family and children are everything for a woman'* (Female, 27, Federal Agency). Like the assignment of various traits to men and women that made them supposedly more or less suitable for leadership, the images that linked women to their family roles were commonly used as a justification for men's and women's different career aspirations.

The respondents commonly acknowledged that while public service was feminised, top decision-making positions were occupied by men. When asked to share their own explanations for this gender pyramid, the respondents provided reasons that were closely linked to social expectations regarding the gender division of labour both at work and in the family. For instance, since women are expected to achieve fulfilment in the family rather than professionally, the public sector that offers a range of low-paid jobs with limited prospects for promotion was well-suited for them (Utkina, Gasparyan 2019). At the same time, public service attracted fewer men because as breadwinners they could not afford to earn low salaries.

Interestingly, the effect of gendered images and symbols can extend beyond the organisation. Since the work of employees in public service is intricately connected to public relations, the number of mentions of one's accomplishments in official social media accounts serves as an important criterion in promotion considerations. However, such mentions are reserved for those who already occupy relatively high positions. Since such positions are dominated by men, it is men and their achievements that receive a mention in social media posts addressing the public and other stakeholders. Thus, the image of the organisation projected in social media is dominated by male managers, which reinforces the assumption that public service employees who are capable of achieving high results are predominantly men.

Workplace interactions

Workplace interaction practices are characterised by informal networks from which women may be systematically excluded. For instance, one respondent stated that while male colleagues played soccer and went to the bathhouse after work, participation in these informal interactions was not suitable for women:

Why are men promoted? Because they went to drink together [...] and now they are already friends. So, it will already be more enjoyable and comfortable for them to work together, and then they will stand up for each other. Naturally, a woman will never get into such a group. (Female, 25, Federal Ministry)

In general, the respondents had different opinions about the importance of such interactions. Although some believed that socialising with co-workers outside of work had no connection with formal duties and workplace interactions, others expressed concerns that exclusion from informal networks led to exclusion from decision-making processes.

Another peculiar feature of workplace interactions was that women received concessions not afforded to their male colleagues. For instance, women were allowed to leave work earlier on the days prior to long weekends or public holidays. The respondents explained that this practice was a result of commonly shared beliefs that family commitments were a priority for women, whereas men were perceived primarily as workers who had to fulfil their professional duties delegating family and childcare responsibilities to their wives. Thus, while the recognition of women's roles as wives and mothers potentially makes their workplaces more family-friendly, it also reinforces a negative image of women as workers who cannot fully dedicate themselves to work. Along with gender stereotypes that depict women as less reliable and trustworthy, these informal mundane practices may result in the unequal distribution of responsibilities and hence unequal opportunities for promotion for male and female employees.

Changes associated with anti-COVID measures

In the context of the pandemic, wide-spread beliefs about men's and women's work and family responsibilities translated into an unofficial rule that women had to be given a priority when employees were shifted to remote work. Civil servants who belonged to high-risk groups, such as older employees and those considered primary carers for children, were among the first ones to transition to remote work. As a result, women constituted the majority of employees who were allowed to work remotely. The respondents generally highlighted both advantages and disadvantages of such COVID-related measures. Positive changes included women's ability to better balance work with family and other responsibilities. For example, one respondent gave birth during the pandemic, and teleworking allowed her to combine motherhood and

professional employment without taking maternity leave that would have resulted in a significant decrease in income (Female, 27, Federal Ministry). Remote work was also beneficial for public servants who combined full time employment with education since they could allocate more time to conducting research and completing assignments. Paradoxically, teleworking allowed female public servants to devote more time to work: *'Meetings have disappeared, which I am very happy about. That is, in fact, time was freed up for doing proper work'* (Female, 25, Federal Government Agency).

At the same time, the pandemic combined with the reform of public administration led to negative changes in work practices. Many of our respondents noted an increase in the amount of work and the duration of the working day. *'My colleagues and I [...] just worked on this platform 24/7 and 7 days a week. For example, today my first message landed at 5 am, because we plan to relaunch the platform'* (Female, 25, Federal Government Agency). Despite the readiness of the female employees to extend their working hours to remain productive, as noted above, many of them had to work in the conditions of uncertainty regarding their employment prospects due to the large-scale layoffs associated with the new reform.

Thus, neither the pandemic nor the newly introduced public sector reform significantly altered the gender division of labour at work since it is largely determined by external structural factors, such as gender stereotypes and sex segregation in the labour market. The pandemic also had little effect on symbols and images that sustain the division of labour. Men continued to dominate the symbolic space (e.g., social media mentions of achievements) since such domination is conditioned by employees' position in the hierarchy that remains unchanged. Unsurprisingly, a symbolic element that did change when many employees began to work remotely is dress code. However, the issue of dress-code was unproblematic for the respondents in the pre-pandemic times, and this change was inconsequential in relation to gender segregation or gender inequality at work. Finally, the pandemic and the rollout of the public sector reform produced mixed results in relation to workplace practices. Although telework allowed employees to devote more time to family responsibilities, they also had to keep irregular hours. This was mainly because, on the one hand, many employees were made redundant, and, on the other hand, the need to shift to remote work required an accelerated completion of many previously unfinished tasks related to digitalization. Moreover, the respondents who continued working remotely when some of their colleagues returned to the office felt excluded from informal communication that was the source of important information and in which they had actively participated prior to the pandemic.

Our analysis suggests that the most significant and positive, albeit short-term changes for female employees occurred in the gendered process of workplace interactions, namely the interruption of informal male-dominated networks. As noted above, in the pre-pandemic era, male informal practices outside of working

hours were widespread among civil servants. For example, male colleagues could bond and discuss work-related matters at a bathhouse or in a bar; female colleagues' participation in such practices was deemed inappropriate. This led to nepotism and the emergence of a 'male diaspora' (Female, 25, Federal Ministry). However, with the shift to telework, opportunities for male informal interactions and hence for the maintenance of the existing 'male diaspora' decreased.

Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated how gender processes operate in Russian public organisations and assessed whether these processes were affected in any way by the anti-COVID measures and the new reform of the public sector. We operationalized gendered processes drawing on Acker's theory of gendered organisations and used these indicators to conduct and analyse interviews with female public servants working for the federal government in Russia. While the existing research that examines the impact of the pandemic has focused on the gender division of labour in the family as well as gender differences in outcomes such as productivity, unemployment, and income (Collins et al. 2021; Kristal, Yaish 2020; Qian, Fuller 2020), the present study sought to assess how anti-COVID measures, combined with the new administrative reform, have influenced gendered processes in public service organisations.

The results of this study show that neither the pandemic nor the newly introduced public sector reform had any significant effect on the gender division of labour as well as symbols and images. However, remote work interrupted informal male-dominated networks and interactions from which women previously had felt excluded. While this change might appear insignificant, it can have long-term consequences. The erosion of informal male-dominated networks can be a catalyst necessary to make hiring and promotion decisions in public organisations more meritocratic, which in turn might help female civil servants overcome the glass ceiling. Thus, the results of this study suggest that despite the persistence of most gendered process that disadvantage female public servants as well as the emergence of negative outcomes associated with staff redundancies, the administrative reform that promotes increased digitalization might mark the beginning of a shift towards greater gender equality and a greater representation of women in decision-making positions in Russian public organisations, at least at the federal level.

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