

# Gender and Family Roles in Post-Soviet Russia

## Abstract

Without diminishing the very real setbacks women have suffered in the post-Soviet transition of the 1990s, this paper argues that Russia's resurgently patriarchal culture is not as monolithic as many scholars have suggested. Using in-depth interviews with twenty couples, I find that individuals who express traditional gender attitudes in survey questions often enact far more egalitarian gender strategies in their marriages and families. I also show why women may actually enjoy greater flexibility than men in forming gendered identities in postcommunism.

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## Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the western press has published a regular flow of articles about the changing gender climate in the former Soviet Union. They describe Russian women seeking a traditional breadwinning man by becoming the bored, beauty salon-hopping housewives of the new rich or signing up in droves for international matchmaking services (e.g. Trickey 1995, Stanley 1997a, 1997b). Popular media and survey data reveal that an overwhelming majority of both men and women believe in the supremacy of traditional patriarchal gender roles: man as breadwinner, woman as homemaker. Russian masculinity and femininity are generally unquestioned as social constructs and assumed to be natural (Vannoy et al 1999:61; Kay 1997:80; Einhorn 1995:225; Goscilo 1993:237).

A wave of academic literature from Western and Eastern feminists also emerged in the early to mid-90s discussing the apparent resurgence of patriarchy in Eastern Europe. Most Russian scholars agree that the proliferation of patriarchal models in the late 1980s and 1990s is part of a backlash against Soviet models of androgynous worker-women and the blurring of sex roles. Many see this as evidence that Soviet policies spread only a thin veneer of “equality” over the entrenched patriarchy of pre-Revolutionary Russia (Einhorn 1995: 227). Certainly women have suffered setbacks during the transition period of the 1990s, and patriarchal values have become more overtly pervasive in Russia’s post-Soviet media. I argue, however, that Soviet *egalitarian* policies and rhetoric made a lasting impact that is reaching beyond the collapse of the Communist Party. Russia’s “patriarchal renaissance”<sup>1</sup> is not as monolithic as some have feared or described.

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase is used by Anastasia Posadskaia as quoted in Marsh 1996:302.

I use survey data and in-depth interviews with both husbands and wives to describe how larger trends in gender attitudes play out in the actual gender role negotiations within families. I find that in lengthy conversations and in the decisions they make for their lives, Russians do not consistently adhere to the opinions they express in more abstract written survey questions. Public polls on gender attitudes can be indicative of general trends. However, they fail to capture the contradictory complexities of how men and women actually formulate gender strategies as couples. In exploring the gender roles and work-family choices of men and women in the context of parenthood, I find evidence that a post-Soviet backlash has not crowded the Soviet icons of sexual equality or of the woman-worker completely off the shelves of available gender role models. For example few women are interested in giving up work altogether, and Russian men rarely exercise the kind of patriarchal authority in the home that they claim to uphold in survey questions.

I argue therefore, that although Russian women have lost representation in the corridors of political, economic and cultural power, they may enjoy a larger repertoire than men from which to choose cultural constructs, symbols, and gender role ideologies in formulating gendered strategies of action in a rapidly changing world. Thus women may be enjoying more psychological flexibility than men in post-Soviet Russia. My ethnographic data provides new insights to the picture of a resurgent patriarchal culture in the former Soviet Union that has been painted by other scholars.

As sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) has theorized, actors form strategies of action (i.e. work-family choices) by drawing on pieces of culture in their cultural repertoires (i.e. gender beliefs) available to them within the context of structural constraints. I refer to these pieces of culture as *symbolic resources* (i.e. values, beliefs, habits, social skills, etc.). In my research, I

measured symbolic resources based on answers to questions about gender role preferences, values, beliefs and habits in written surveys and interviews.

Given the extensive documentation and analysis of the role of gender norms during the Soviet period, I refer here only briefly to the Soviet gender legacy.<sup>2</sup> In short, as women's primary roles constantly expanded and contracted under pressure from the state's economic and demographic needs, women consistently retained a measure of influence and power in their homes. While women (especially urban women) were drawn into the paid workforce, men were not conversely drawn into the sphere of unpaid domestic work. Men's roles as breadwinners and heads of household remained relatively static and were undermined in both material and symbolic terms by the dominant role of the state in both public and private spheres.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning gradually with perestroika in the 1980s and accelerating rapidly in the 1990s, the state has relinquished its monopolistic hold over economic and social life. Given its powerful influence in gender relations during the Soviet period, the receding state has now left new space for gender role negotiation. Some argue that it is also changing the perceived relative value of family and work spheres with paid work gaining greater prestige over domestic work (Rudd, 2000: 518): this too has a different impact on men and women. Couples now face new pressures and different economic constraints and opportunities as they retool their work-family arrangements.

### **Men and Women in Transition:**

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<sup>2</sup> For excellent reviews of the history of gender norms and the constant push and pull on women as workers and mothers during the Soviet period see Attwood (1993), Lapidus (1978), Voronina (1993), Lissyutkina (1993), Spencer (1996), Holmgren (1995), and Kay (2000).

<sup>3</sup> For example, women grew less dependent on men's income because of their own working status and because of the growing state supports offered to women and children.

Western observers are practically unanimous in their assessment that the transitions following the collapse of the Soviet Union have been especially unfavorable to women as a group (UNICEF 1999, Centeno and Rands 1996, Einhorn 1993, Lissyutkina 1993, Attwood 1996). The most obvious erosion of women's status in Russia can be seen in their practical disappearance from political life, their disproportionate numbers among the newly unemployed and the poor, and the eroding value and availability of social supports for women and children. Because these negative impacts on women have been well-documented, the following section will focus more on how men have fared in transition. I then explore implications of these effects on strategizing gender roles within families.

Men have certainly suffered from high unemployment rates and severe wage arrears in the state sector, although they have been less likely to lose their jobs than women. But they have faced other more gender-specific pressures as well. It has been argued that socialism emasculated men by eroding their individual initiative or depriving them of an essential role in their families.<sup>4</sup> Now, with the newer push for a more traditional division of labor, men are suddenly left with higher expectations to provide single-handedly for their families in an economic climate that has favored only a small minority. Most Russian men have no experience with unemployment or with the difficult burden of finding new work in a choked economy. This is not the world they were educated or trained for. The toll of the transition on men can be read in higher levels of alcoholism, higher crime rates, and suicide rates. It is also reflected in the alarming drop in life expectancy for men relative to women since 1990.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For work on the prevalent theme of the superfluous man and heroic woman in Russian literature see Goscilo and Marsh. See also Lissyutkina (1993) and Voronina (1993).

<sup>5</sup> The risk of premature death for men rose 70% from 1987 to 1994, and has only begun to decline in the last half of the decade (Goskomstat, 1999). Men's life expectancy is lower than the average for Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa. The gap between men and women in Russia remains one of the largest in the world (World Health Organization, 2000).

Men in my study never questioned their expected role as provider. Most of them only regretted that they could not do a better job so their wives could stay home in the traditional gender model they preferred. They were frustrated with the environmental factors that thwarted their earning power. And where women commonly expressed the theme that women should work only by choice in jobs they find personally satisfying, several men in my study gave up the low-paying jobs they loved for more lucrative but also less satisfying “soul-less” work. These are men more willing to make personal sacrifices than “gender role” sacrifices. The primary duty of men in families as providers is clearly delineated and appears deeply internalized in spite of years of sharing that duty with the Soviet state.

Under the enormous pressures of economic crisis, it is men who are expected to fill the financial resource gap left by crumbling Soviet supports. Women who “fail” in the workplace can blame the economic crisis and still derive a sense of identity and purpose from their role in the home. As the wife of a busy surgeon, who curtailed her own medical career to handle the housework and child care, asserted:

Work is always more important for a man’s sense of self. A woman can prepare a good meal and make a family and that can be her self-affirmation. But for a man, self-esteem is his work, so of course he’ll spend more time there.

—Radiologist, Mother of one

Thus even though women have been the more malleable labor force subject to mobilization according to state needs, this very mobility has also bequeathed them a broader base from which to derive their sense of identity. Although women face greater structural constraints in the new economy—most notably, options for pursuing meaningful careers—they also have a wider range of tools to choose from in their strategizing toolkits. Men have more confined toolkits and less culturally accepted leeway in choosing a gender strategy. Their more singular role of provider is

relatively rigid and clearly defined.<sup>6</sup> And because men face the difficulty of structural constraints in a crisis economy, they are more vulnerable to falling short of gender expectations. From a psychological standpoint, men may actually be more squeezed than women in the post-Soviet economy. I turn now to my interview data in order to illustrate these findings.

## **Data and Methods**

The data for this paper are derived from dissertation field research in Saratov, Russia<sup>7</sup> in 1998 and 2000. The heart of the data consists of in-depth oral interviews and written responses to a questionnaire garnered from a core sample of twenty married couples with children. The extensive time I spent with each family in a series of interviews and participant observation provided a richness of data impossible to attain in survey data or in one-time sampling. I interviewed each spouse privately and then together as a couple. Interacting consistently with these families over the course of many months, including follow-up visits two years after the initial interviews, allowed me to observe fluctuations in employment, living conditions, and family arrangements.

I chose to limit my sample to married couples with at least one child who was about 9-10 years old. It was also important to me to include only dual-parent homes in order to explore the issue of gender roles in family organization. I located a few of the couples through networks of acquaintances. Most of my sample, however, I recruited directly by attending parents' meetings for third grade classes in four different schools. I selected schools in different neighborhoods and with differing levels of competitiveness and cost in order to access parents from a range of

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<sup>6</sup> This renewed emphasis on sex-role differentiation is consistent with the findings of anthropologist David Gilmore: traditional masculine roles of provider and protector are more sharply defined in cultures during times of scarcity or crisis (Gilmore 1990).

socio-economic backgrounds. This stratified sampling method yielded an interview pool which reflected about 50% average low-income families, 25% more stable, middle class families, and 25% wealthier and more upwardly mobile families.

My data for this paper therefore consists of published material gathered in Moscow, Saratov and the U.S., field notes from participant observation, and transcripts of the tape recordings of every interview with my core sample of 40 parents. I hired native Russian speakers to transcribe these interviews in order to minimize errors and misunderstandings, after which I translated the texts into English and coded them by theme. In order to preserve confidentiality I have changed the names of the participants. Although my sample size is too small to generalize broadly to all of Russia, my in-depth data suggest important realities within families that are not easily captured in large-scale surveys. I hope my findings will be used to fine tune future research on the postcommunist gender climate.

### **Gender Beliefs vs. Gender Strategies**

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, Russian views on gender and gender roles are overwhelmingly traditional and essentialist. As a rule, men are portrayed as the rightful primary actors in the public sphere and women as the primary caretakers of the hearth and home—the spiritual centers of their families. My own survey of twenty couples reflected these beliefs when I asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the following statement: “It is better for all family members if the husband provides for the basic material needs of the family and the wife cares for the home and the children” (see Table 1).

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<sup>7</sup> Saratov is a large city (population approx. one million) located on the Volga River about 250 miles south of Moscow. While Moscow and St. Petersburg have cultural and economic histories that make them unique in many



**Table 1:** It is better for all family members if the husband provides for the basic material needs of the family and the wife cares for the home and the children.

	Husbands	Wives
Strongly Agree:	14	12
Somewhat Agree:	6	3
Neither Agree Nor Disagree:	0	3
Somewhat Disagree:	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	2

As I proceeded with in-depth interviews, however, I learned that beliefs framed in abstract survey questions didn't always match up with role choices and behaviors. Although 100% of the men and 75% of the women in my sample agree that a traditional arrangement of spousal roles is best for everyone, only 25% of the households could actually boast such an arrangement. Also, several of the women who indicated strongly traditional views in survey questions told me at some point in interviews that they would personally be unhappy as a full-time housewife and couldn't imagine staying home all day. There seems to be a difference in many minds between what is better for "everyone" and what is better for individual women. In fact, all four of the full-time housewives in my sample claimed that they wanted to work—mostly for personal fulfillment. Some of their comments include:

A woman should have work that she loves, something she enjoys doing—not for money.

—Housewife, mother of two.

...A woman should be a woman and should have a choice: to tell someone to stay put and cook and clean isn't right. Everyone has his or her own leanings. Some women have very masculine tendencies to think logically and some men are wishy-washy and can't earn decent money...

—Housewife, mother of two.

Many of the women who worked full-time expressed a desire for fewer hours and more control over their schedule to help manage housework and mothering duties, but were not interested in

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ways, Saratov—in size, economy, and industrial make-up—is much more similar to the average Russian city.

giving up work altogether, even if their income were to become unnecessary to household survival.

This strong interest in work outside the home by the women in my sample is very much reflected in larger-scale research. Numerous surveys in the late 1980s and early 1990s show that a majority of Russian women would prefer to keep their jobs even if their husbands earned enough to support their families. A 1995 survey conducted by the Russian Center for Public Opinion Research (VTsIOM) showed that women have similar commitments to work as men.<sup>8</sup> Work is an important component of their identities, they rely on their work collectives for companionship and support, and they value making a contribution to social production (Ashwin & Bowers 1997:25, Pereventsev 1995:123).

I also found in my own sample that although most men said they would prefer their wives to be home full-time, none of them felt they had a right to insist on such an arrangement. Most recognized that their wives' income was helpful to the family, but they also respected their wives' desire—and right—to work.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, support for traditional family roles in my sample doesn't always equate with strong patriarchal views. My survey question about who should have the last word in a family decision is much more evenly distributed across the spectrum of opinions (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** The husband should be the head of the family and should have the final say in family decisions.

	Husbands	Wives
Strongly Agree:	6	4

<sup>8</sup> Given a list of statements about work, 14.0% of men and 14.7% of women opted for “Work is important and interesting to me irrespective of pay.” The other end of the spectrum also showed similar views between men and women: 3.9% of men and 5.3% of women opted for “Work is an unpleasant occupation. If I could I wouldn't work at all” (cited in Ashwin and Bowers 1997:26).

<sup>9</sup> Sociologist Elizabeth Rudd found a similar pattern in postsocialist East Germany (Rudd 2000:532).

Somewhat Agree:	4	3
Neither Agree Nor Disagree:	7	5
Somewhat Disagree:	1	3
Strongly Disagree	2	5

As expected, more men than women favor a patriarchal arrangement, and one third of the entire sample agreed with it; thus preference for a patriarchal model seems to have survived Soviet social engineering quite well for a solid minority. Overall, however, whereas only a few women opposed a traditional division of labor (see Table 1) far more support egalitarian decision-making (see Table 2) which seems to indicate a separate-but-equal ethos in marriages. This is very similar to the findings of gender attitude research in Italy where young parents are choosing traditional divisions of labor as long as they are based on non-hierarchical family models with an emphasis on the arrangement being a voluntary choice subject to change (Björnberg, 1992).

And although half the men indicate a preference for husbands to be heads of household in the survey question (see Table 2), most of the more detailed answers in interviews revealed a high level of self-consciousness about just what this patriarchal role entailed. Almost every man in my sample who claims to be the head of the household (and believes that this is appropriate) qualifies that role in some way:

It depends. I don't think I should be the master and that's it. If a decision has to do with children's needs, then my wife takes care of it and the final word is hers. If the question has to do with the car, garage, and furniture...then the decision is mine.

—Mechanical Engineer, father of two.

I try never to come to that point [where one person has the final word]. I try to work it out... we both have veto power in the family.

—Electrical Engineer, father of one.

Basically yes [I consider myself to be head of the family], but I try...you know ... it's not like without me there's nothing. I try not to degrade her with that. I don't act like I'm higher than her.

— Engineer, father of two.

One husband, even though he noted in the survey that he agrees the man should be the head of household, described his actual family arrangement in very different terms:

Sometimes I have the last word, sometimes [my wife does], depending on the question. We never have anyone proclaiming “I have said it, period!” We have a well-developed democracy.

— Mechanical Engineer, father of two

It would seem that if patriarchy is alive and well in post-Soviet Russia, it is often—at least in the intimate sphere of the family—a kinder, gentler patriarchy. Men seem to respect their wives and are mindful of women’s preferences in wielding the authority that most men and women seem to think men should hold.

This comparison of survey data to interview data indicates that abstract beliefs about gender roles are not always played out in actual gender role negotiation or in behavior, and thus the conservative trends touted in popular and academic surveys may not tell the whole story. I turn now to examples from my interview research of how couples are negotiating work-family choices in a post-Soviet gender climate.

### **Gender and Work-Family Choices**

In my interviews, I traced the work histories of the twenty couples in my sample through the entire decade of the 1990s. Given how the transition has been predominantly described in popular and academic press, I expected to find couples wishing for a traditional, patriarchal family arrangement with the wife home full-time and the husband earning a family wage. Most, however, would be unable to achieve such a luxurious household order due to the economic crisis and the need for dual incomes. There were some traditional couples with high-earning husbands and stay-at-home wives in my sample, but they were relatively few. In fact, couples

held a range of work-family preferences and experienced, of course, a range of economic constraints. Some couples would have preferred a traditional arrangement but the wife had to work for the family to survive. In other cases, the couple would have preferred a more egalitarian arrangement with the wife earning more, but she couldn't find a professional job in a severely contracted and sexist labor market. These are examples of gender role negotiation being dominated by economic structural constraints.

In many households, however, I found that gender role negotiation and economics had an interactive effect—dual-earning parents had choices about how much to work, and selected options more in keeping with their gender preferences. I was more likely to find men making significant personal sacrifices to increase their earning power even as their wives scale back on their jobs, without quitting altogether. It would appear that a dominant pattern has yet to emerge in post-Soviet Russia. The stories I collected certainly do not show an overwhelming return to a patriarchal model of the home and family. Couples often experiment with different gender role combinations. What follows are two stories which represent a certain pattern:

*Marina & Igor:* Igor started the decade of transition working for a factory in a technical engineering job he found challenging and personally satisfying. But when the factory's wages failed to keep up with inflation and then went into arrears, he reluctantly gave it up in favor of the cash-in-hand income he could earn from doing private remodeling jobs in other people's homes. Once Igor had built up his one-man contracting business to a point where it was supporting his family, Marina, his wife, took a cut in hours and pay and opted for a demotion from college administrator to college instructor. She felt it was important for her to be with their son when he came home from school and so she opted for a less prestigious job but where she had more control of her hours. They were both satisfied with this arrangement. She liked the

social and intellectual stimulation of her teaching and didn't want to give it up completely. But now she had plenty of time for managing the household and devoting more attention to their son (who struggled with grades and health problems), including spending whole summers with him at the family dacha on the Volga River while Igor stayed in the city to work. Igor sorely missed the intellectual stimulation of the work he had been trained for but never doubted that he had made the right decision as a husband and father.

*Lidia and Andrei:* Both husband and wife in this couple are medical doctors and both had busy hospital jobs in the mid-90s, but were still only surviving by pooling resources with Lidia's parents who lived next door. In spite of their financial need, when Lidia was downsized from her hospital department, she looked for a less lucrative alternative that would relieve her workload. She joined a radiology department where she would have fewer hours, fewer demands, and no night shifts, allowing her to devote more time to managing their home and being with their 10-year-old daughter. Andrei was passionate about his work in emergency anesthesiology and spent long hours at the hospital. After the 1998 ruble crash, when it became clear that even his three separate positions at the hospital and extra shifts were not going to be enough to support his family, he quit the work he loved to become a businessman in a friend's pharmaceuticals company. Andrei felt that his new work was "soul-less" and it pained him to take what he felt was a materialist path, but he also never questioned his duty to be the primary earner in the family.

Both of these men were married to capable, professional wives who enjoyed their work and cared about their professional identities. Nevertheless, it was the husbands who made personal sacrifices to maintain their gender role as providers rather than expecting or arranging for their wives to share more fully in that role. The women in these families contributed to the

family income, but they also strove to keep a balance between family and work. For women, work is seen as much as a source of personal satisfaction and sanity as it is a source of earnings. For men, earnings trump personal satisfaction. It seems to be universally more acceptable for women to experiment in where to put their energies than for men to do so. Take, for example, the case of Oksana.

Oksana and Viktor live with their two children in a one-room apartment. He works for the state utility company “Gazprom” which in 1998 was about six months behind in paying wages. She was an elementary schoolteacher earning about \$30-50 a month.<sup>10</sup> In spite of their very modest existence, however, Oksana decided in 1998 that she would take a year off work. Her salary was meager for the hours she put in and she was already handling the lion’s share of the housework. She wanted a rest. Both she and her husband have traditional views about household roles, and Viktor supported her decision. Oksana described it as an experiment to see if the family could get by.

Two years later, I asked how the experiment had fared. Oksana had stayed home full-time for a year and a half and had enjoyed the rest. She had read more fiction (her personal hobby) and spent more time comparison-shopping to save family income on purchases. Viktor had enjoyed having a cleaner apartment and ready meals when he came home from work. But Oksana confessed that she had soon felt restless and missed the teaching, which she loved. She told me, “I wasn’t brought up to sit around at home. I need to feel like I am doing something useful for society.” By January 2000, she was back in the classroom at a school nearer to home. To his chagrin, Viktor once again found the kitchen table covered with papers to grade rather than a hot supper when he arrived home in the evenings. He told me he much preferred to have Oksana home full-time for his own personal comfort, but would never insist on it. He honored

her personal preferences and her right to work—even her right to experiment with the work-family role that suited her best.

## **Discussion**

Russia is a profoundly sexist society—especially in the higher echelons of political and economic power. The Soviet ideals of sexual equality and the importance of paid work to personal identity have suffered from a strong backlash and currently compete with widely appealing rhetorics of women as protectors of the hearth, spiritual centers of the family, and deserving of economic support by their husbands. Yet this is precisely my point: ideals of sexual equality still compete and remain very much a part of the post-Soviet cultural landscape as available models for women to draw on. Thus an unqualified portrait of contemporary Russia's entrenched patriarchy and essentialist gender beliefs is misleading. One of the few scholars to write about this continuity is Rebecca Kay:

Data indicate that attempts to convince women of a single ideal to which they must aspire have not been altogether successful. Ironically the areas where women seem most acquiescent are those relating to inner qualities and personal relations, whilst the wider reaching stereotypes and constraints on women's lifestyles...meet with greater resistance. Whilst women may...seek a man's 'strength and protection' [and] may be pleased to imagine themselves ruling over an exquisite and perfectly ordered home, they are not prepared to see themselves limited to the private sphere only, reduced to brainless bimbos with nothing to offer but their physical attractiveness, or condemned to a life of self-sacrifice and material hardship as over-worked, unappreciated mothers (Kay 1997:94).

I suggest that these “unsettled times” of transition in Russia are forcing conversations and flexibility about gender roles that weren't possible a generation ago.

This lack of cultural consensus on appropriate gender roles is reflected in my finding that both men and women respondents contradict themselves within interviews and their responses to

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<sup>10</sup> Before the September 1998 ruble crash, her salary was valued at about \$50. After the crash it dropped to \$30.



survey questions are often inconsistent with other conversations and with their actual behaviors and choices. The widely accepted patriarchal role of men as heads of households is highly tempered by expressed beliefs in democratic decision-making processes on the part of both men and women. And many women are actively experimenting with their preferences and balance between work and family with at least the tacit support of their husbands, no matter how traditional their stated beliefs.

It is simply too early to declare an overwhelming victory for patriarchy and women's oppression. The Russian economic crisis is taking its toll in different ways on both men and women. Women may actually be better off psychologically during this transition given their legacy of multiple, malleable roles to identify with, while men suffer from the pressures of a tightly-circumscribed role made especially difficult in economic depression. Given greater stability and economic opportunity most women show little sign of wanting to stay home full-time over the life course. They may be unlikely to push for men to take on greater domestic responsibility, but they are more likely to push for flexible work, especially part-time options. Unfortunately this leaves Russia with the same "stalled revolution" that Hochschild (1989) observed in the west. If Russians can hold on to the strong socialist supports that have helped enable dual roles in the market and family spheres, then women will at least enjoy more choice in how they balance work and family.

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