

**The emancipation of women in the peasant community in Russia of the 1920s': in the context of Mordovians**

Vladimir Miroshkin

Mordovian State Pedagogical Institute named after M. E. Evseyev, Studencheskaya St., 11a, Saransk, Republic of Mordovia, Russia

**Abstract.** The article studies the change in social status of woman in the Mordovian community environment in 1920s'. The relation of the peasant community to the Soviet power policy on the women emancipation is considered based on archival sources and folklore material. The paper analyzes the status of Mordovian woman during the emergence of new stereotypes and moral values, as well as considers the basic forms of involving Mordovian women in social and political life. Emphasis is placed on the importance of national factor and communal principles in preserving the traditional world outlook. The research findings and conclusions are used by Mordovian State Pedagogical Institute named after M. E. Evseyev in the educational process through teaching the bachelors disciplines, such as "History of Russia" and "Ethnography of Russian folks", as well as following courses: "Formation of ethno-cultural and ethno-religious tolerance of students of pedagogical high school" and "Cultural history of Mordovian territory".

[Miroshkin V. **The emancipation of women in the peasant community in Russia of the 1920s': in the context of Mordovians.** *Life Sci J* 2014;11(6):543-546] (ISSN:1097-8135). <http://www.lifesciencesite.com>. 80

**Keywords:** Emancipation of women, gender, community, peasants, Mordovians, Soviet power

**Introduction**

Investigation of the women's emancipation processes in the peasant community environment seems relevant in both scientific and practical purposes. Historiography of the problem allows us to conclude the presence of a stable interest to this issue among both foreign scientists, and their Russian colleagues. Thus, the assessment of views and activities of the Bolshevik Party in respect to the women's emancipation, the study of transformation processes in the public mind in terms of such category as "women's question", reconstruction of biographies of prominent Bolshevik women, and the analysis of inherent psychological factors of women's movement are reflected in the writings of R. Stites [1], A. Heytlinger [2], M. Buckley [3], A. Holt [4], R. McNeil [5], R. S. Elwood [6], E. Wood [7], E. Waters [8], Goldman [9], A. Bobrov-Khayal [10], K. Katz [11] A. Macaulay [12] and other foreign researchers. The Russian historiography of the issue is quite extensive as well. Here we should highlight the study of the authors, who have reflected some aspects of women's emancipation in the Mordovian peasant community; these are writings of V.A. Balashov [14], N.F. Belyaeva [15], V.V. Miroshkin [15, 16, 17, 18] etc.

The article attempts to determine the attitude of Mordovian commoners to central power's policy pursued emancipation of women, to evaluate the degree, to which female part of the peasant community perceived these measures, as well as to clarify the role of the ethnic factor in these matters. Documents, retrieved from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia (CSA RM) were used as

a source base. They are mostly handwritten that makes certain difficulties in their study and treatment. Nevertheless, this material is quite valuable, since it not only allows us to solve the problems formulated in this article, but also characterizes the socio-moral picture of Mordovian village of 20s' years of XX century, as well as its cultural level.

**Main part**

The Bolshevik Party, which came to power in October 1917, sought to rely primarily on disadvantaged and oppressed layers of Russian society. In this regard the solution to the women's question for them was of particular interest. In prerevolutionary Russia, imperfect, subordinate position of woman in family and society was fixed by law and consecrated by religious tradition. Woman's life was confined within a hearth and home. In family life she was entirely economically dependent on her husband and had to obey and put up with such inequality. According to the Bolsheviks, the oppressed woman was their natural potential ally, so they did everything possible to attract sympathy of fair sex in favor of the new regime. All laws that perpetuated women's inequality were abolished during the first months of Soviet power. Women's political equality was enshrined in the first Soviet Constitution (1918). According to a number of acts, adopted in 1917-1918, women were equalized with men in civil, family and marital law, labor law, and education. At that, the emphasis was made on women's involvement in production and social life. After the All-Russian Congress of Workers and Peasants (1918), special commissions on agitation and propaganda were created among the workers and peasants, which were

converted at the end of 1919 into the work departments among women. These bodies pursued the following priority tasks: spreading the party's influence over the broad working and peasant women through their political and cultural education; involving working and peasant women into the party, professional, cooperative and Soviet construction; holding through the Soviet professional cooperative organizations and other institutions the activities on building establishments that could liberate working and peasant women (such as nurseries, canteens and so on.).

The general policy with regard to women, pursued by central power, affected also the status of Mordovian women. In the traditional way of life they had a fairly high status and were equal guardians of family well-being. Although the wife was not involved in the family council and solve family economic problems, but enjoyed the moral influence on her husband. This feature with regard to spouses is reflected in the oral folklore: "Good spouses have the same thoughts and say the same words" and "The gates are kept by two pillars, while the house is kept by two minds" [19: 36-37]. However, the final decision was left to husband, whom the wife had to obey. Mordovian women were equally empowering in parenting issues. This is evidenced by the surviving oral tradition: "Being able to bear children, must be able to bring them up", "Where goes the mother, there goes a child" [19: 41, 44]. Authority possessed by Mordovian women in intrafamilial issues was largely a consequence of their important role in the ceremonial life of family and community. Nevertheless, although they had a significant status in Mordovian family in terms of education of children, as well as in the sphere of religious cult, though they were actually removed from participation in social and political life. Inactivity of Mordovian women was noted also by representatives of women's departments: "Great challenge is set on core group that must spark interest of Mordovian women and the community, awaking them from their slumber" [20: 2].

Great efforts to involve Mordovian women into the public life were carried out by female and delegate meetings. The first were mainly women rural core group meetings, while latter more closely resembled so familiar to the villagers rural gathering, but consisting mainly of the female part of the peasant world. Sometimes such meetings were attended by men. Spectrum of the problems discussed there was rather diverse ranging from the arrangement of backyard and organization of medical care to the situation inside the country and abroad [20: 28, 21: 18ob.]. Resolutions of the women gatherings and delegate meetings did not have the gathering strength of judgment. Though these meetings served women a

tribune, from where they could apply with their immediate problems to the villagers and to the local authorities. Such meetings helped women to understand their own importance and to engage into social work.

Mordovian women gradually realized the novelty of their societal status. For example, residents of Novley village adopted the following resolution: "On behalf of the women of Novley village to send deep gratitude to the Soviet government, which liberated women from the oppression and gave way to the cultural development" [20: 46]. New trends in the women' minds can be seen by the discussed issues, which were not specific to their traditional attitude: "How to get a divorce?", "How to behave if the husband puts an affront? Is the wife able to call him to account?" [21: 18, 22: 10]. Changes, taking place in the mindset of Mordovian women, are well evidenced by folklore tradition as well. New songs that reflected other image of the woman, different from her traditional character, and praised new prospects and opportunities that became available for woman, as well as new ditties, reflecting newly emerging views on a woman, her place and the role in the family and society, were conceived [13: 140].

However, the energy of Mordovian women was focused primarily on the housing and housekeeping. Initiatives of women aimed beyond the family, were not encouraged by their husbands. An illustrative case occurred in the Elnikovsky volost of Krasnoslobodsky county, where the bridegroom refused to marry his fiancée since she was elected a chairman of the general meeting of village citizens, reasoning that if his girlfriend begins to control the peasants before marriage, she is not suitable for family life [23, 13].

Also, the consciousness of Mordovian women was conservative to a certain degree. Archival documents contain statements of the following nature: "I say that our women, who have their husbands, do not go to meetings. They [husbands] do not allow them [wives] to attend the meetings, and the women themselves say that they have nothing to do there" [20: 15]. The same is seen in the worldviews of women in Russian communities: "Why should I go to a meeting when I do not have any needs?", "What is the utility that I work in the rural council when I am illiterate?", "If we choose all women to the rural council, what should we do with men?", "We have no time to attend ... we came on Wednesday on a holiday, but in everyday life no one will come" [20: 13 par.]. Even harder work was held among Tatar women educated in accordance with the rules of Islam. Thus, one of the documents states: "To gather women in the Tatar village is very difficult. They are too oppressed, the law in relation to Tatar woman is very strict; Tatar

woman is still locked, and it is very hard to convince her to go to the meeting" [20: 12].

Solution to women's question was largely hampered due to the dominance of communal traditions. In Mordovian community a common stereotype was that woman was perceived as a homemaker and family keeper, as the personification of family happiness and prosperity. She was traditionally engaged in housekeeping, the welfare of the whole family largely depended on her knowledge and skills. Any kind of activity outside the home was considered reprehensible. The institution of community, holding a strong position in the economic and everyday life of the peasants, was always safeguarding traditional worldview. Ethical behavior norms became non-compliant with the new requirements. Perception of woman as victim and family hostage, engrafted by Bolsheviks, caused misunderstanding among the Mordovian peasants. The commoners believed the involvement of "peasants' wives" in the public life of the village and entitlement women to make decision on urgent mundane matters, to be at least an unattainable luxury.

The authorities tried to destroy the habitual attitude of the peasants. To this end, it held various advocacy activities that sought to ignore the age-old tradition of the everyday peasant life. Thus, in the Mordovian Pichpanda village the reelections of the council were held by parish authorized person during the absence of men, who were at work on log haulage. Subsequent complaints from commoners were disregarded by parish election commission, having mentioned the fact that women, who participated in the elections, accounted for 47% of all voters of the village" [23: 13].

Sometimes Mordovian peasants, taking a retreat from community foundations, had to do much more substantial concessions, what is called in the "voluntary-compulsory manner", under the joint effort of the rural women's society. Thus, Mordovian women of Rybkin village achieved proportional representation in re-election to the village council" [23: 13].

But despite the powerful indoctrination, public attitudes to women's participation in the native "male" affairs changed quite slightly. Thus, in Rybkinsky parish, in the Mordovian village of Zaytsevo, the chairman of the village council Petryakov announced at a gathering of peasants that he never will call peasant women to the village meeting, as he believes that women have nothing to do there. In another Mordovian village of Zaberezovo of Krasnoslobodsky parish, Mordovian women complained that men did not consider them as human beings and not invited to the meeting [23: 13]. The minutes of women and delegate meetings note also the

pursuit of Mordovian peasants to ignore women's participation in the resolution of public problems. Thus, the resolution of general meeting of delegates from the Kulikovka village, dated January 10, 1927, contains the following statement: "We should ask the village council to notify carefully women members of rural council about the meetings" [20: 14]. One of the minutes of other delegates meeting from Mordovian village of Shiromasovo includes the following question: "Why rural council does not always invite women delegates to the meetings, considering their invitation unnecessary?" [24: 5].

It should be noted that such situation is not unique just to Mordovians, but is relevant also to other ethnic groups. For example, in the Russian village of Efaevo of Krasnoslobodsky parish "citizens did not allow women to attend rural meetings" [23: 13]. The resolution of the women rural meeting in Tatar village of Lower Urledim states the need to "carefully invite women to attend meetings of the village council" [20: 10]. In this regard, the story of Gorshkova, a Russian peasant woman from village of Yakovschina, is quite remarkable: "Here we were in the election of cooperation; when you want to raise the hand for whom you want (to vote), then they [men] say: non of your bees-wax, do not vote for him; they do not allow you to do what you want ..." [20: 10]. Desire of Mordovian woman to participate in solving the problems of the village in course of socialist construction sometimes led to her bullying by villagers. As an example, let cite the statement of one of the women members of the Boldovsky village council: "We, the women, cannot work in community service, because ... Mordovians [over us] laugh and cry [behind] on the street, while higher authorities pay little attention to this fact" [20: 33]. In this respect the saying of a resident of the Mordovian Kulikovka village is also indicative: "Here is the attitude of our men and women. I just came to the rural council, and one comrade pushed me in the chest and began to call all sorts of bad things. I cried and went home. No doubt, next time I will not go anywhere else" [20:15]. It is the presence of hard psychological pressure, manifested with the same success in both Mordovian and other national communities, explains the presence in the minutes of women gatherings and delegate meetings the questions such as: "Weather a woman can prosecute the men, who laugh at women at the meetings?", "What can a woman do in public organizations,... if men still regard women with derision?", and "Why we do not struggle against those men who gibe over the delegates coming to a general meeting of citizens? " [20: 33, 65, par.75]. Sometimes the application of physical force was used as a warning in addition to gibes and insults. The existence of such phenomena is evidenced by the presence of

following question on the women's meeting agenda: "Does the chairman of the rural council is allowed to push and hit?" [20: 21].

### **Conclusions**

Thus, the Mordovian peasant world views on women's participation in the building of socialism and their status in the new society were diametrically opposed to official policy. Activities of the Soviet power on the "women's question" in the village encountered a wall of misunderstanding. Under these conditions, most Mordovian women, who grew up in a patriarchal environment and absorbed all the features of the existing way of life, felt themselves an integral part of the world. Mordovian woman, keeping in mind the ancient customs and rituals, herself played the role of communal principles keeper. Official policy, aimed at the destruction of the customary mental outlook of women, simultaneously provided a blow to the communal consciousness and way of life. The formation of new values in Mordovian peasants was a longstanding process. In the 20s', traditional norms and behavior rules towards women were dominating. Community stood guard of the old order through its public opinion. Mordovian women themselves still poorly expressed the interest in social and political life. Among them a number of activist women were very small. These included mainly soldiers, widows and poor peasant women. A similar situation existed in the Russian communities of the concerned territory. Tatar women differed by even more conservative world outlook.

### **Acknowledgments**

The article was prepared under financial support from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation at the expense of Procedure #2 "Modernization of research and innovation process (content and organization)" of the Strategic Development Program "Pedagogical Personnel for Innovative Russia" of the FSBEI HPO "Mordovian State Pedagogical Institute named after M. E. Evsev'ev" for 2012-2016.

### **Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Miroshkin, Mordovian State Pedagogical Institute named after M. E. Evseviev, Studencheskaya St., 11a, Saransk, Republic of Mordovia, Russia.

### **References**

1. Stites, R., 1978. The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia. Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism. 1860-1930. Princeton; N. J., pp: 336.
2. Heitlinger, A., 1980. Marxism, Feminism and Sex Equality. Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union Conference, N. Y., pp: 9-21.
3. Buckley, M., 1989. Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Ann Arbor, MI.
4. Holt, A., 1980. Marxism and Women's Oppression: Bolshevik Theory and Practice in the 1920s'. In the Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union Conference, N. Y., pp: 87-114.
5. McNeal, R.H., 1972. Bride of the Revolution: Krupskaya and Lenin. The Early Decrees of Zhenotdel. Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union conference, N. Y., pp: 75-86.
6. Elwood, R.C., 1992. Inessa Armand: Revolutionary and Feminist. Cambridge University Press, pp: 304.
7. Wood, E.A., 2000. The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia. Indiana University Press, pp: 328.
8. Waters, E., B. Clements, B. Engel and C. Worobec, 1991. Female Form in Soviet Political Iconography. Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, pp: 240-241.
9. Goldman, W.Z. and B. Clements, 1991. Women, Abortion, and the State, 1917-1936. Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, pp: 248.
10. Bobroff-Hajal, A., 1994. Working women in Russia under the hunger tsars: political activism and daily life. Carlson Pub, Brooklyn, N.Y., pp: 326.
11. Katz, K., 2001. Gender, work and wages in the Soviet Union: a legacy of discrimination. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp: 308.
12. McAuley, A., 1981. Women's work and wages in the Soviet Union. London Allen & Unwin, pp: 228.
13. Balashov, V.A., 1992. Everyday culture of Mordovians: traditions and modernity. Saransk, Mordovia book publishers: 256 p.
14. Belyaeva, N.F., 2004. Community, the Mordovians. Saransk, Mordovia Book Publishers: 331-349.
15. Miroshkin, V. V., 2011. "Domestic" orthodoxy as an element of the Mordva ethnic identity in the first third of the XX century. The Humanities and Education, 3(7): 90-93.
16. Miroshkin, V. V., 2011. To the question of the relation of the Mordovian communal peasants to the educational policy in the 1920s'. The Humanities and Education, 1(5): 85-88.
17. Miroshkin, V. V., 2012. The structure of the Mordovian peasant community at the beginning of the 20th century. The Humanities and Education, 3(11): 105-109.
18. Miroshkin, V. V., 2013. Traditional values in the conditions of the society modernization. The Humanities and Education, 1(13): 113-116.
19. Samorodov, K. T., 1986. The Mordovian sayings and proverbs. Saransk, Mordovian Publishing House, pp: 280.
20. Central State Archive of the Republic of Mordovia (CSA RM).-1-P.-F.30. – Inv.1.1.-D.16.
21. CSA RM. – 1-P. – F.485. – Inv. list 1. – D.51.
22. CSA RM. – 1-P. – F.1263. – Inv. List 1. – D.5.
23. CSA RM. – 1-P. – F.16. – Inv. list 1. – D.266.
24. CSA RM. – 1-P. – F.485. – Inv. list 1. – D.52.