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American Councils: Title VIII Research Scholar/Combined Research and Language Training Program/Special Initiatives Fellowship Program

Final Report—10/1/2008

(1) Report of Research Accomplishments:

My overall aim during my research in St. Petersburg, Russia, was to understand professional women's experiences with work and personal relationships, particularly motherhood. This was broken down into three specific goals: (1) to study the significance of work, motherhood, and other relationships important to women; the roles entailed in each; and the resources—material, social, and cultural—that women needed in order to fulfill these roles (2) to understand the forms of authority influencing these women's decisions about pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing, and (3) to examine how structural incompatibilities between women's work and their personal lives affected their own sense of well being.

These goals informed all of my research activities, which consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant observation with 31 individuals of a variety of ages. All of my informants owned or occupied the highest managerial positions in businesses located in St. Petersburg, or had at one point in their lives done so. Participant observation took place along with these women's male partners and husbands, friends, children, other relatives, and colleagues. Interacting with informants and their social networks at events to which they invited me formed the cornerstone of my work, as this was how I was able to gain informants' trust and better understand how work and personal relationships were embedded in their everyday activities.

I was able to fully meet my research goals for the field research stage of my project. I was greatly aided in doing so by the generous financial, administrative, and educational support of several American organizations. American Councils was instrumental to my project through the help it provided me in arranging my student visa with Herzen University, as well as the intensive lessons it provided in Russian writing and conversation. I cannot emphasize enough how important the language instruction was to me, as it helped me to greatly improve my day-to-day communication skills and my research. Just as critically, it enabled me to practice discussing and writing about my research in a variety of public forums.

Although I have fully met the goals of my field research, it is important to note that this does not comprise the entire project. I have just begun to analyze my data and develop theoretical insights and policy recommendations. I plan to complete this process by June of 2009. Following this step, I will return to St. Petersburg during the summer of 2009 to ask any follow-up questions that come up during the process of data analysis; to present and discuss my findings with interested parties; and to incorporate their responses and critiques into my final dissertation.

At present, however, I can point to several initial observations and comment on their relevance to policymaking. The first observation concerns my informants' frequent comments that local and national political discussions on Russia's demographic crisis do not fully address their own concerns. For example, in the St. Petersburg city government since 2005, there have been media campaigns and training programs centered specifically on encouraging women to pursue business careers. Russian politicians, journalists, and social scientists justify these efforts based on the premise that a stable, satisfying career for a woman will motivate her to have more

children. According to many of my informants, who agreed with these overall premises, there have not been effective measures to address sex discrimination in hiring practices and within the workplace, the enforcement of laws protecting pregnant women's rights, and issues of pay inequality and sexual harassment in the workforce. Some of my informants were greatly affected by these problems. Informants also emphasized questions of household divisions of labor and spouses' and relatives' expectations that women avoid mention of their professional identity while at home. These women stressed how political discussions that prioritized higher birth rates should also more fully take into account their overall quality of life, and how it may be affected by having more children.

My second observation relates to women's desire to transform themselves as individuals in order to cope with what they see as a socially unstable environment in Russia. Many emphasized how their relationships with male partners, their employment statuses, and their own and family members' health were central but highly precarious aspects of their lives. Changes such as one's own or a spouse's loss of a job, rapid inflation, the severe illness of a dependent relative, or a spouse's decision to leave were always possible. Accordingly, it was important to these women to develop certainty that regardless of their surrounding circumstances, they would go on taking care of their own and their dependents' basic needs, going to work or to seek work, and supporting or seeking out relationships regardless of their surrounding circumstances. These informants invited me to lectures and seminar discussions, usually but not always based at their workplaces, whose leaders prioritized a variety of goals, from the development of particular professional skills, to broader goals such as identifying one's purpose (tsel') in life.

The leaders, physical settings, durations, and costs of these activities varied greatly. However, a major component in all of them was the use of "psychological" techniques to allow the individual to better control her environment. A common example included exercises in visualization, during which participants created collages representing their professional and personal goals—a practice that some women expected to bring about results directly—that is, through the process of visualization itself. Visualization was also used to bring about changes in informants health. Generally, the women who were involved in these activities did not always have the close-knit social support networks that other informants could rely upon for help with everyday material and emotional needs. These were women who had just gone through or were going through a divorce, who had recently moved to St. Petersburg, or who felt isolated from friends and family for various reasons. Therefore, participating in such trainings with women helped me to understand the social processes through which they did not depend on family or other social institutions such as healthcare clinics or local government to meet their needs.

Third, I observed that other women who had more reliable local social networks were able to weave together their work and their personal lives in creative, unexpected ways. Four women, for example, began their own businesses at times when they as well as their spouses or grown children greatly needed income and livelihoods. In doing so, they provided these family members with employment, allowed these family members, in their view, to become creative and productive members of society, developed businesses that they believed served important broader social functions, and kept income circulating within the same household. This observation compliments the previous in that it sheds light on how women's social networks, when they do exist at the local level, can be instrumental to their quality of life.

These observations point to at least one important question that I plan to answer through my data analysis: Given that these women are struggling with some of the same issues of gender discrimination, reproductive health, and violence addressed by feminist movements throughout

the world, why is it that they are not involved in such movements themselves? Many of these women reject or are openly hostile to such movements, although organizations exist within Russia that might provide them with valuable forms of support. There is a fast developing body of ethnographic research on feminism and civil society in Russia, which focuses largely on the goals and experiences of women who do participate in organized social movements. One major question not yet fully addressed is why many Russian women mistrust and do not participate in these social movements. In addressing this question, my research will add valuable insights to political and theoretical discussions as they relate to gender discrimination, labor issues, reproductive healthcare, and population decline in Russia. For example, policymakers in Russia might use my results in order to establish more effective or broad-reaching education, job training programs, or employment opportunities for Russian women domestically or abroad. More generally, my research will shed light on the processes that can influence the growth of strong democracies throughout the world. I will keep American Councils posted on my findings as they develop, as well as any future publications or presentations I make.

During the past year I spoke about my research questions and observations in a wide variety of forums, including at American Corners of St. Petersburg—a nonprofit organization affiliated with the United States Embassy. This lecture was entitled “The Reproductive Decisions of Professional Women in St. Petersburg, Russia.” It was given in English to women studying tourism at local universities, and to representatives of the United States consulate in St. Petersburg. The primary purposes of this lecture were to (a) help these women to practice speaking in English about a topic of intellectual and personal importance to them, and (b) allow me to discuss several preliminary observations with them, particularly given that some fall (or will soon fall) within my subject population of urban Russian businesswomen. Also, as an English discussion group leader at American Corners, I was involved on a weekly basis with the center’s activities, allowing me to discuss my research on a less structured basis with staff and visitors to the center. I also regularly discussed my research questions and observations with my Russian colleagues at the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR) in St. Petersburg, an NGO supporting sociological and anthropological research in Russia. From the perspective of international diplomacy, I see both of these activities as equally important to the findings I will eventually present in the same forums. That is, remaining in communication about my research with local leaders was a way for me to demonstrate my interest in their culture and society, while also keeping my research focused on questions that Russians find most important.

I plan to return to St. Petersburg in the summer of 2009 after I have completed a draft of my dissertation. During this time I will present and discuss findings and any policy recommendations with staff at American Corners, CISR, as well as at the American Councils office in St. Petersburg. In retrospect, my time in Russia was fundamental to the completion of my overall research project. As I am writing an anthropology dissertation, the time I spent with Russians who fall into my study population is the most important part of this project—the basis for the findings and policy recommendations that will grow out of my research, as well as for the theoretical contributions my research will make in the fields of anthropology and demography.

(2)How effectively did American Councils assist you in the following areas:

- A. Pre-departure preparations: travel, stipend, university affiliation, visa, home stay, pre-departure information.
- B. In-Country Support: finalizing arrangements at your university, assisting with archive access, arranging support services (medical care, etc.) as needed.

C. If you participated in the Combined Research and Language Training program, please also evaluate your classes and instructors.

American Councils assisted me extremely effectively in each of the above-mentioned areas. Their help arranging my visa and with in-country support was invaluable to my project. I appreciate how thorough the American Councils staff was in these respects. They helped me take care of every last detail, including being picked up from the airport upon my arrival in St. Petersburg.

I did participate in the Combined Research and Language Training program, and was very happy with my classes and instructors. The instruction was thorough, organized, and highly challenging. My instructors were very supportive and knowledgeable.

(3) Your Future Plans:

My timeline for the remainder of my research is as follows:

- I will complete a first draft of my dissertation by June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009. During this period, I will submit at least one article for publication in an American scholarly journal. I will also share some of my study findings in a paper at the annual American Anthropological Association conference in November, 2008.
- In June-August of 2009, I will live in St. Petersburg, Russia (depending on funding), in order to share and further develop my findings, through discussions with informants and at American Councils, CISR, and American Corners.
- By January 2010, I will revise and complete my dissertation, and defend it within the spring semester, 2010.
- During the 2010-2011 academic year, I hope to begin work in a tenure-track assistant professor position at an American university. As part of this work, I will transform my dissertation into a book.