Chapter 7

Conclusion

The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in December 1991 signaled an end to an age that has been called ‘the age of revolutions’ (Hobsbawm). Soviet Union, with all its flaws and distortions, had represented an aspiration and hope that an alternative to global capitalism was possible for millions of struggling people and movements across the world. However, the disintegration of the ‘alternative’ pole has tilted the international balance of power in favor of hegemonic global capitalism and the world political order has yet again moved over from a multipolar to a unipolar world order. The presence of Soviet Union had imposed some checks and balances on unbridled expansion of capitalism but with its collapse even the need to keep up the ‘human face’ of capitalist aggression has been done away with. The accelerated pace and aggressive expansion, territorially and ideologically, of global capitalism since the decade of the 90s is now before us with its full ruthless implications.

For those in the periphery of advanced capitalist liberal democracies, it has meant an even more forceful imposition of detrimental structural adjustment policies, large scale dispossession of poor people, cultures and languages being lost forever and a widening gap between rich and poor. For those living within advanced capitalist liberal democracies in the first world, it has meant a renewed legitimization of withdrawing welfare provisions by the state and an increasing threat to the physical survival of the people from attacks by impoverished periphery. For those living in the territories of the former ‘socialist bloc’ including the nations formed from former Soviet Union, it has meant an exercise in learning the harsh truths of what earlier was called false party propaganda, the greed and cruelties of unbridled capitalism. Although the bitter pill has somewhat been sweetened by the enhanced space and possibility of civic freedoms for the people who had long since been denied these by the erstwhile Soviet regime.
One of the most striking faces of the collapse of Soviet Union was the explosive and sudden visibility of formerly inaccessible ‘socialist’ woman, splashed across media worldwide. Russian newspapers and tabloids featured nude pictures of Russian women to announce to the people that freedom to express and to consume had arrived. As the world voyeuristically consumed more and more uninhibited display of women’s bodies from the erstwhile Eastern bloc, conflicting images of desperate former women doctors and university teachers ferreting through garbage and selling their possessions to be able to survive the harsh winter of the transition added just the right amount of realistic touch to the otherwise surreal reality. Russian versions of ‘Playboy (‘Andrei’)’ announced in their editorials that they were certain that “Andrei’ has ‘helped strengthen democratic tendencies in the area of social awareness and rights” (Gosilo 1996: 136). As Romanian women were shown waiting in lines to have abortions on U.S. television as instances of newly arrived freedom and ‘socialist coldness,’ their bodies became once more the site of complex contest unfolding between the vanquished ‘East’ and a victorious ‘West’ (Borcila 2009). As more and more misogynist backlash openly ‘normalised’ itself, emerging Russian feminists got caught between opposing or endorsing pornography as a phenomenon like ‘chicken pox to which people will develop immunity in due course’ (Posadskaya in an interview to Molyneux, 1991) and not allow the state censorship to intervene in what was perceived as the ‘private’ affairs of individuals.

In the present research we set out with the task of exploring the implications of the transition of Russia, particularly for women, from a Soviet socialist command economy system to a neo-liberal capitalist free market system. As the consolidation of the forces that brought about the transition is still an ongoing process, the ‘transition’ is still not over. The tumultuous and traumatic downslide in the entire decade of the 90s was followed by some economic, institutional and legal stability brought about in the wake of petro dollars in the next decade. However, global recession is threatening the ‘East’ including Russia, the fragile equilibrium achieved after many financial maneuverings and her recently achieved economic security. We put before us the question whether women of Russia had lost or gained in the process of transition. This question has no easy answers as the process of analyzing a still on-going process does not allow the benefit of
distance from which to make any objective assessments. Also, the women in Russia have not been the passive recipients of events unfolding around them. They have mobilized all learnt and earned resources to respond to such excruciating challenges. Many a times they have had to cope with the basic challenge of formulating survival strategies to enable them to find food to feed themselves and their families, coping with the harsh winters and finding some work to stay afloat.

The process of the transition has also released the untold capacity of taking initiatives and evolving creative strategies to forge an alternative in women. It has shaken up, to say the very least, the slumbering pools of energy and suppressed desires latent in the previous regime for which mostly women had no outlet. However, the courage and creativity being shown by the Russian women notwithstanding, the question remains if their rights and capacities have been eroded or enhanced in the current scenario. More importantly, the question still remains if the direction, which has been taken by the transition with western guidance and followed all through irrespective of the regime changes, has the potential of taking the unfinished agenda of women’s emancipation forward or regressing it back to before the October revolution which had changed the entire lives of the Russian people. Somewhere, the implication also touches upon the broader question of the possibility and relevance of socialism as a potentially emancipatory system, despite the bitter and unresolved experiences of women in ‘actually existing socialisms.’ Does the agenda of socialist-feminism continue to hold the imagination of women’s struggles the world over for a better world and a non-patriarchal future?

The momentous implications of the collapse of Soviet Union are still being felt and analysed the world over. Euphoric celebrations of the West have been accompanied by proclamations of ‘end of ideology’ and even ‘end of history’ as though the failure of ‘actually existing socialisms’ has once and for all vindicated the neo-liberal assertion of the invincibility of capitalist liberal democratic order. However, long term trends and indications emerging from the erstwhile failed ‘socialist countries’ are suggesting otherwise. Increasingly attempts are being made to analyse the external and internal factors which led to the eventual collapse of one of the most inspiring historical events in
the preceding century. Those who have remained critical but committed to the relevance of socialism have unflinchingly explored the increasing deformities and mistakes, tragic denial of internal democracy and rise of bureaucratic party-state that came to characterize ‘socialist’ politics and practice in the former socialist countries.

Gorbachev’s unsuccessful perestroika and ambiguously ‘successful’ glasnost deepened the crisis. Instead of dismantling party-state control over the Soviet economy and society and empowering the working people by re-establishing their control over the farms and the factories through the workers’ and peasants’ soviets, Gorbachev could merely shake the murky waters enough without actually doing anything substantive. What Gorbachev’s could manage was “…On the contrary, the all too visible and tragic denial of democracy in the Soviet system made democracy per se so overriding an issue in the ultimate crisis of the system that anything, including capitalism, could now be smuggled in the name or guise of democracy…in a paradoxical coincidence, democratic reforms had now arrived in the Soviet Union in tandem with the market reforms. In a situation where people simultaneously sought freedom from the Party’s arbitrary and oppressive exercise of political power and freedom from the command economy’s arbitrary planning…the demand for democracy became synonymous with that for the market economy. The coincidence obscured, for some time at least, the essential contradiction between democracy and the market, between political freedoms or democracy and economic ‘liberalisation’, in as much as the market or economic liberalization, whatever the benefits it brings, especially for the few at the top, invariably brings poverty and unemployment for the common people and inequalities in society” (Singh 2006: 485). Yeltsin and his backers relied on such obfuscation to usher in ‘shock therapy’ economic reforms overnight with the western interests supporting him all through.

That this was a part of the still ongoing cold war agenda of global capitalism became clear as all productive state assets, of incalculable worth, were blindly destroyed for a pittance, the most remarkable achievement of the country in terms of its research and development, resources and trained and highly skilled personnel were either lured into the west or were employed in labs now servicing foreign concerns. International
financial institutions made the ‘rules’ by which the transition was to take place. Scrupulous following of these ‘rules’ was made a pre-condition for the desperately needed aid and integration into global community. The centrality of the role of western interests in effecting a total transition was brought home by Sachs (1993: 4) when he said, “Success in the economic transformation will depend not only on the East, but quite fundamentally on the West as well.” The aim was not to aid Russia to evolve into another competing capitalist power; rather it was to take Russia so far back that she could never hope to rise again. As Sachs (Singh 2006: 513) put it, ‘the core purpose was to finish off the state socialist system and conclude the cold war agenda’. Lewin (1998) pointed out that the incredible short-sightedness of shock therapy reform approach was readily interpreted by large numbers of Russians as proof that the aim of western policy was to turn Russia into a dumping ground. He added that sadly, that is exactly how things were turning out.

The crucial question facing the Russian people remains as to what kind of future awaits the country? Was this capitalism going to be like the long promised haven of prosperity and consumer freedom as in the West? Or was it going to be a third world kind of comprador capitalism? Two decades down the line since the transition it is becoming clear that Russia is far from acquiring even the state of prosperity that existed during the Soviet regime. It is also becoming clear that Russia is even further from having the prosperity enjoyed by global capitalist centers. Randhir Singh points towards the ongoing ‘third worldisation’ or ‘Latin Americanisation’ of Russia which has been the outcome and purpose of the IMF-Yeltsin programme of economic reforms. As he (Singh 2006: 535) put it, “…It (western capitalism) desired to reduce Russia to a dependent, second rate capitalist power, a source of raw materials...a service economy...with the local ‘businessmen’, rather the ‘nomenklatura-mafia bourgeoisie’ of Russia, acting as main allies, agents, and business subordinates of western capital, much in the manner of parasitical third world elites. Pressures generated by global capitalism’s ongoing recession and stagnation in world trade only reinforced western capitalism’s interest in transforming Russia along these lines to complement their ‘advanced industrial economies.’” Commenting on what future seems most probable for Russia, sociologist...
Kosygina says, “We are developing a distinctly Latin American social profile. Our new class lacks any sense of social responsibility or even elementary patriotism. They sell raw products to the world market, and purchase back from it most of what they consume. They keep their money in foreign banks, spend much of their own time abroad, and do not invest productively in Russia. The economic cycle, involving much of the country’s basic wealth, hardly touches the population at all. At the same time, a majority of Russians are being impoverished, stripped of such economic and social rights as they previously enjoyed, and left to find their way in a new world that offers them few opportunities. It’s perfectly possible for a country to exist for decades in a chronic state of under-development, endemic corruption and political crisis. Present trends would suggest that this is Russia’s future (Singh 2006: 535).” The analysis is borne out also by the fact that Russia’s new capitalist class uses their newly acquired capital assets for financial investment or speculation and not into productive investments.

Many of Russia’s oligarchs rose through dubious activities in banking, financial speculation and special favors granted by the state. This made such a choice of investment preferable. Menshikov (Singh 2006: 544) points to the fact that not a single new important plant or factory had been build eight years after the transition and that the economy was operating exclusively by utilizing productive capacity created under Soviet socialism. Majority of state enterprises and collective farms were in functioning order when the decision to dismantle them was taken. Chenoy (1998) pointed that there was no real crisis in their structure, function, organization or output when it was declared that the entire system was to be reformed. The suddenness of ‘shock therapy economic reforms’ was a key feature of the reforms to minimize potential resistance, particularly from the gigantic labour force and unions as the enterprises they worked in were privatized. It was to prevent any ideological or democratic debate over the actual nature of the Russian transition. By the time Yeltsin finished with his term his popularity had dropped to a dismal single digit.

Former President Putin’s eight years in office from the year 2000 to 2008 and his continuing hold on power, including getting his chosen successor Dimitri Medvedev elected as the current President, has in many ways cemented the transition from Soviet
socialism to Russian capitalism. Putin arrived on a wave of well orchestrated victory over terror in Chechnya just months before he recorded a land slide victory as President in March 2000. Anderson (2007) elaborated on the new alliances being forged in the international arena and pointed how ‘Clinton hailed the ‘liberation of Grozny’ and Blair sped to St Petersburg to embrace the liberator.’ He further pointed how in a further gesture of soulful blending, “...Putin joined cause with Bush’s war on terror after 9/11 and declared Chechnya another front to be fought in this war. He opened Russian airspace for B52s to bomb Afghanistan and opened and accepted American bases in Central Asia priming Northern Alliance for Kabul.” However, after being unceremoniously snubbed by the West, the relationship between Russia and the West somewhat changed. Accession of Baltic States brought NATO threateningly close to Russia’s doorstep. Good returns on oil prices enabled Russia to emerge as an energy giant with leverage over energy dependent west. It has also enabled Russia to stop being a ‘ward of the West’ and enabled her to emerge as an independent nation in its own right in the world of global capitalism. This has also made it more opportune for Russian political leadership to assume oppositional political postures with the West in keeping with the growing anti-western sentiment at home.

However the windfall gains brought about by high world market prices of oil came crashing by the end of 2008 with the crash in oil prices to $50 per barrel amidst global crisis. Gidadhubli (2010: 27-28) has studied the impact of global financial crisis on Russia. He pointed that oil and natural gas have accounted for 55 to 60% of Russia’s export revenues and generated gold and hard currency reserves exceeding $600 billion, the third largest in the world. The severity of the impact of global crisis on Russia with her dependence on hydrocarbon resources can be gauged by the fact that currency reserves plummeted by about $200 billion in 2009. President Putin’s economic policies’ emphasis on energy sector at the cost of other crucial non-energy sectors such as engineering, chemical industries, consumer goods, heavy industries and so on have had grave implications for Russia’s continuing economic stability. These policies have failed to utilize the gains of petrodollars to diversify, technologically upgrade and modernize its economy. Russia’s banking sector has also proved to be especially vulnerable to the
ripple effects of global meltdown since a significant part of currency reserves were not
invested at home; rather they sat in low-yielding securities in private banks abroad. Putting
finance capital in the lead, Russia has opted for almost total deregulation in
finance capital transactions which enabled such large scale transfer of funds from Russia
to abroad. Russian oligarchs have made the most of this policy orientation by converting
their rubles into dollars and taking them out of the country instead of investing
domestically. Russia’s domestic neo-liberal economic policies along with the global
recession has led to a severe impact on the people as metals, construction, retail trade,
banking and private sectors retrenched and cutback on many workers to stay afloat.
“Even the Russian railways slashed 54,000 workers by the middle of 2009. The crisis
impact even reached defence enterprises...The Economic Development ministry
announced in April 2009 that 7.5 million Russians, comprising 10% of the workforce
were jobless, an underestimate of the reality” (Gidadhubli 2010: 29). Barely two decades
after the transition the vulnerability of opening up the economy to the excesses of global
capitalism have resulted in disastrous impact on the people with benefits to a small class
at the top.

We have explored the internal and external dynamics giving birth to the class
which took over and transferred all political and economic power to a few at the top. The
very nature, motives and architects of the Russian transition have ensured the exclusion
of the majority from assuming any power, economically, socially or politically. The
slogan, ‘democracy without women is no democracy,’ of the first independent women’s
forum held in late March of 1991 in Dubno, brings this fact closer to home when
hundreds of Russian feminists commented on the kind of democracy that Russian people
are being offered. Kirillova (1994) reiterated the feminist assessment of the kind of
democracy being ushered in Russia in her analysis of women’s marginalization from all
decision making and economic spheres of society. Ousted from representation in the
Parliament, the new business class or the ruthless mafia profiteering, women in particular
are the single largest group which has lost out in this transition. They have lost out on
political and economic power and are finding it increasingly difficult to stay in the job
market and maintaining their families amidst the renegotiated ideological onslaught of
neo-liberal capitalism. The previously ‘feminised’ sectors of Soviet economy like the vast state enterprises, teaching and medicine have been hit the hardest. The intelligentsia as a whole has been made to pay a very dear price in this transition.

The intelligentsia, which had high stakes in ushering in a new order after the bureaucratic, ossified and rigidly controlling Soviet order is also one of the most impoverished communities in today’s Russia. Anderson (2007) points to some of the facts describing the current situation when he says that, “...Fifteen years later, what has become of this intelligentsia? Economically speaking, much of it has fallen victim to what it took to be the foundation of the freedom to come, as the market has scythed through its institutional supports. In the Soviet system, universities and academies were decently financed; publishing houses, film studios, orchestras all received substantial state funding...But the tension bred by ideological controls also kept alive the spirit of opposition that had defined the Russian intelligentsia since the 19th century – and for long periods been its virtual raison d’être...

...With the arrival of neo-liberalism, this universe abruptly collapsed. By 1997, budgets for higher education had been slashed to one-twelfth of their late Soviet level. The number of scientists fell by nearly two-thirds. Russia currently spends just 3.7 per cent of GDP on education – less than Paraguay. University salaries became derisory. Just five years ago, university professors got $100 a month, forcing them to moonlight to make ends meet. Schoolteachers fared still worse: even today, average wages in education are only two-thirds of the national rate. According to the Ministry of Education itself, only 10 to 20 per cent of Russian institutions of higher learning have preserved Soviet standards of quality. The state now provides less than a third of their funding. Bribes to pass examinations are commonplace. In the press and publishing worlds, which had seen an explosion of growth in the years of perestroika, circulation and sales shrunk remorselessly after 1991, as paper costs soared and readers lost interest in public affairs. Argumenty i Fakty, under Gorbachev the country’s largest mass-circulation weekly, sold 32 million copies in 1989. It is now down to around three million.” As academies, hospitals and private firms vie with each other to make more profits and to lure non-governmental funding from the West it is becoming more and more difficult to avoid the
ideological trappings and conditionalities which inevitably accompany such capital guised as ‘aid’. Women, despite their professional skilled backgrounds are being pushed out of an economy which even today is neither capitalist in the Western classical sense nor very much legal. Black economy, criminal mafia groups and an impassively intimidating state has made the climate in today’s Russia more misogynist than ever before. The journey of Russian people from the Soviet variety of ‘actually existing socialism’ to a crude variety of neo-liberal free market capitalism has been, to say the very least, an eventful one. The bed rock of contradiction ridden former socialist economy is proving to be not an easy matrix upon which developed capitalist structures and institutions can be grafted. It is proving to be a prolonged and painful process unlike the naïve belief of those who ushered in the transition, that it could be accomplished overnight with the aid of ‘shock therapy programmes.’

Randhir Singh’s analysis which put its finger on the crux of the overarching contradiction guiding the Soviet model of ‘socialism’ is confirmed also by the state in which the gender question found itself during Soviet regime and which the Soviet leadership could never overcome. He quotes Sweezy in a comprehensive statement indicating this contradiction which lay in the economistic orientation of Soviet policy whereby as Sweezy put it, “...All policies had to be judged by reference to their effect on economic growth: all were good that contributed to rapid growth, all bad that hindered it. The advance to communism would be an automatic by-product of economic growth and need not be a direct concern of policy makers. The assumption, more often implied than spelled out, was that once socialism in this sense had been firmly established, its own inner dynamic will automatically propel it forward on the next leg of the journey to communism.” (Singh 2006: 247). As socialism was assumed and declared achieved, gender equality and the question of women’s emancipation from centuries old resilient ideological and cultural structures of patriarchal oppression were also assumed resolved. The economistic understanding of achieving socialism set itself the central task of forced rapid industrialization in response to its defence needs and to outpace capitalist economic achievements as an essential and adequate basis for achieving socialism.
It was this orientation which reinforced the focus of Soviet state on bringing more and more women into the sphere of production. It was the outcome of an understanding whereby it was assumed that women’s emancipation would be an automatic by-product of economic independence and their enhanced participation in the sphere of production. The fact that it also fulfilled the needs of economic and military targets set by the state made it even more convenient to overlook the need to question patriarchy which continued to shape women’s roles not only in the family and the sphere of reproduction but also in the much celebrated realm of production and labour force as well. The conjunctures between patriarchal cultural, ideological and economic roles of women and men with those of dominant state ideology could, therefore never really transgress the confines of their patriarchal limits.

While spectacular achievements in economic sphere were also accompanied by a mixing of traditional stereotypes and radical pushing of patriarchal boundaries by women who were indeed becoming economically empowered, it could never come even close to exhausting the emancipatory potential in socialist theory and politics. It stopped way too short with token flowers on women’s day and medals of honor to ‘Soviet heroines’ who could successfully make the stupendous and exceptional effort of fulfilling the twin conflicting goals of the state i.e. in production and tasks of reproduction as workers and mothers. Soviet leadership could never disturb enough the idea of ‘natural’ patriarchal sexual division of labour in all realms accompanied by its ideological and cultural assumptions. While state policies reflected the political will of the Soviet state to bring forth women into a new era of socialism with its changed values, perceptions of self and worth, money and work; simultaneously they also reflected a mechanical and rigid subsuming of the gender question under broader national, more particularly economic and military, goals. Not giving enough space to women to articulate their critiques and shape the state policies only entrenched these distortions further and depoliticized women.

Feminist critics have been insistently pointing to the imbalances in the ‘socialist resolution’ of the women’s question in former Soviet Union. Engles covers some of the contradictions most glaringly present in the Soviet resolution of the women’s question
and points to the paradox of Soviet women's empowerment which nevertheless remained highly normative. She says, "...Soviet women are often self-assured, and they "take it for granted that their lives are varied and purposeful". It would be a mistake to underestimate the degree to which Soviet women's self-respect has been enhanced by their participation in waged labor, in a society that perpetually proclaims the value of both labor and the laborer. The importance of women's labor to women themselves, but especially to society, means that sex-role stereotyping in the Soviet Union remains different from such stereotyping in Western Europe and in the United States...Soviet magazines provide their readers with images of women who are active and productive, "more preoccupied with what they are doing than with the presence of a camera and a photographer"-women who are not very different from the readers themselves, by contrast with the consumer-oriented images in British women's magazines, which present to their audience women who are unattainably attractive and eager to please men. Still, while the images that Soviet media project differ from Western ones, they remain highly normative. Magazines foster pronatalism by emphasizing that even for career women, motherhood is fundamental, and they promote increased productivity by offering as models successful career women who bear little resemblance to the majority of women in low-status, low-paid, and low-skilled jobs" (Singh 1987: 790).

Molyneux (1990) described the paradoxes of 'socialist' resolution of the women's question as being similar to that of nationalities and agrarian question which were all declared achieved and resolved in tandem with the spectacular achievement of near total employment for the population. She called the situation regarding women prevalent in former socialist countries as, "...one of some advances coupled with substantial failures—an apparent paradox best understood in the context of the development strategies pursued by these states, rather than resulting from inadequacies in socialist theory itself. Command economies and authoritarian states of the Soviet variety have attempted to overcome economic backwardness by pursuing policies designed to increase industrial and agricultural output as rapidly as possible...Women achieved formal legal equality and a limited emancipation from the 'old feudal order'; along with men, they gained access to education, employment, cheap food and heavily subsidized health and housing.
Yet the cost of this model was high, and its accumulated failures and distortions fell...especially heavily on the female sex” (Molyneux 1990: 26). Such were the assessments of the complex gender question by feminists within and out of Soviet Union. Such criticisms notwithstanding many feminists have expressed their sense of loss, for women particularly, at the collapse of Soviet Union. Many others have expressed their grave concerns at the turn of events and their implications, especially, for women in Soviet Union.

The shortcomings of Soviet socialist attempts to negotiate the between international hostile capitalist encirclement and the domestically much needed continuation of class struggle ideologically and culturally by resorting to an economistic interpretation of Marxism to achieve socialism are increasingly coming to the attention of friends and foes alike. The denial of democracy and a rigorous questioning of the encounter between socialism as understood theoretically by the leadership and its impact on the people as it evolved led to a mechanical fixing of the problems in the given Soviet frame bereft of any dynamism. It led to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. It led to a celebration of the failure of socialist politics and system by a triumphalist western capitalism and reinforced their assertion of TINA (There is no alternative) factor in contemporary world.

However, policies of globalization have led to widening gap between rich and poor nations and impoverishment of communities at a large scale the world over. The sensitivity of local economies tied to the vagaries and fluctuations of irresponsible and risk prone finance speculation is revealed by the severe impact that global meltdown is having on the people there. The global economic crises and its ripple effect in terms of large scale job cuts and a prolonged stagnation has raised doubts about the durability or even the desirability of continuing global capitalist policies. Large parts of Latin America, Middle East and Asia are forming poles of resistance and attempting to forge alternatives to capitalist liberal democratic system. Global meltdown triggered in the citadel of hegemonic global capitalism in 2008, which has been compared with ‘The Great Depression’ of the 30s, is showing feeble signs of reversing by the year 2010 also. It has had even the fiercest advocates of neo-liberal free market model to express some
need to step up the role of state regulations to regulate the outrageous, irresponsible and insatiable greed of speculative finance capital transactions.

In such a context search for an alternative to global capitalism is an urgently relevant exercise as can be witnessed in large parts of the world from Cuba, Venezuela to Mexico. Many people's movements are integrating socialist tenets with local concerns to build a broad resistance to the multiple effects of the policies of globalization. The experience, even if it was only partially successful, of socialism in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union has historical relevance for people's movements and socialist politics today. The need to look back and find where and how things went wrong is not a mere exercise of the post-mortem of a dear departed friend. It comes with the understanding that socialist agenda is urgently relevant today as a much needed alternative to the world offered by global capitalism. It is to rigorously question the spaces left unexplored in Marxist theory and to satisfactorily integrate and not subsume the constructive criticisms of many emergent discourses like that of feminist theory and politics.

The reception of Gorbachev's 'perestroika' and 'glasnost' was cautious by Russian feminists. They analyzed the patriarchal and 'naturalist' appeal underlying the political and economic liberalization and declared it as a 'male project.' Several feminists warned of the tendency of backlash and registered their alarm at the precipitous drop in women's political participation. Amidst welcome signs of loosening state control and expanding civic freedoms, came telling calls to restore the 'natural' order back from the 'unnatural Soviet' order. As the debilitating effects of 'working' mothers on the stability and morality of Soviet family were acknowledged, it was accompanied by a suddenly frank and open discussion of 'women's actual lack of emancipation.' While noting such trends present in Soviet times and the harsh reality of women's lives the solution being sought was more towards a patriarchal restoration of women's and men's roles in society and economy. As the overall direction of the misplaced reforms initiated by Gorbachev veered decisively in the rightward direction under western guidance, gender relations and patriarchal forces too regrouped to restore women along traditional patriarchal lines.
However sharp the feminist criticism of Soviet Union has been, few have welcomed the neo-liberal capitalist direction that Russian polity has taken since the transition. We explored some macro indicators and the shifts in dominant trends in the position of women that have been becoming more visible in the two decades following the transition. The changes and impact of the transition on the lives of women has also been contextualized in the broader debates in feminist theory and their approaches towards the question of women’s subordination. Contextualising debates and shifts in state policy in Russia in the backdrop of predominantly western theory had two reasons. One was to implicitly take note of the increasing encounter between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, not the least in the realm of ideology and theory witnessed in the mammoth body of scholarly attention that this region has received since the collapse of Soviet Union. The imbalance in the relationship between the two and the influence of theories from liberal capitalist west is visible as the position of Russian scholarship is under much greater pressure to prove their distance from their near ‘socialist’ past and to woo western funding. Such theoretical encounters are more discernible in strategies of resistance and mobilization being sought more in identity politics and post-modernist analysis of the ‘Russian condition’ rather than in some collectivist social direction.

The other reason is to revive the abiding interest of feminist theory, especially socialist-feminist theory, in the agenda of socialist-feminist emancipation of women the world over. The debates within feminist theory in the west have not been inconsiderable and it would be of some significance when these debates are juxtaposed with the theoretical currents and debates emerging amongst Russian feminists grappling with the feminist responses in Russia. Women in Russia have distinctly different historical past and subjectivities from their however deformed ‘socialist’ experience. This context has, however, also the possibility of eclipsing Russian subjectivity and experiences and subsuming their response under a largely occidental triumphant celebration of liberal democratic theory as the normative one. Keeping this caution in mind, we have focused on the neo-liberal turn in Russian polity and state policies to analyse the situation of women in contemporary Russia. We have taken up feminist criticisms of neo-liberal capitalist ideological and theoretical premises which underline not only the general
orientation of the transition but which are especially visible in the reorganization of the Russian state and its policies regarding women and the emergent post-collapse gender order in Russia.

The introduction gives the political and economic context of the transition with a brief background of the internal dynamics of Soviet Union which contributed in its final collapse. Western hand was more than a guiding force somewhere in the background. It was one of the significant architects of the transition, actively forming the rules and setting the neo-liberal paradigm in which the transition did indeed take place. As the foundations of Soviet state’s gender contract crumbled, the forces organizing state and social norms also underwent a profound change. The transition was a radical and irreversible rupture from its Soviet socialist past, as it was meant for those supervising it to be. The political, economic and social order took the capitalist direction of neo-liberal free market economy and each successive regime, irrespective of its mixed rhetoric, has consolidated this trend. Many policy shifts and responses of the state regarding gender relations can only be assessed in the backdrop of this ideological and political shift in Russia.

Both socialism and neo-liberal capitalism have been subjects of intense feminist scrutiny and debates in their analysis of women’s oppression and possible basis of mobilization for their emancipation. The intense debates that have energized and taken the body of feminist theories forward are marked by their central concerns with women’s sexuality, their procreative roles and its relationship with processes of production. In chapter two we have outlined our theoretical position as that strand of socialist-feminist theory which problematises ‘production’ and ‘reproduction’ by destabilizing the split explicitly or implicitly maintained by all other theories. Also, as distinct from, but by no means uncritically opposed to, post-modernist formulations of constructivist notions of gender identities, this approach nevertheless, emphasizes on the need to hold on to political agency and subjectivity of women to make any resistance to structures of oppression possible. It critiques identity as an adequate basis of women’s mobilization and reiterates the need to historicize intersections of class, race, caste and gender in their particularities to formulate a strategy of resistance. Therefore, the Russian transition is
looked at as a shift in the interplay between major societal forces guided overarchingly by the imperatives of global capitalism. This shift has informed the changing dynamics of gender order emerging in Russia and has changed the basis of women’s response to their present condition.

Soviet state’s ‘productivist bias’ enabled an unprecedented number of women to come into labor force and take up jobs. We have noted persisting trends of sexual division of labor that informed many Soviet labor practices such as sex based job segregation, wage differentials, lesser skilled and lower paid jobs and more horizontal than vertical mobility of the female work force. These trends were simultaneously accompanied by a staggering number of women achieving a significant measure of economic independence and them integrating the notion of work and worth into the idea of ‘self.’ Post-collapse surveys showed that, particularly in Russia, women were reluctant to give up their jobs even if the income of their spouses were to rise significantly. While gender ideology was also ‘naturalised’ in Soviet Union in ways that made women and men accept sexual division of labor along ‘natural’ patriarchal lines; work component of their identity also made a number of assumptions inherent in this natural hierarchy quiet meaningless. Women in Soviet Union were more independent, decisive, and competent in being able to manage their families and work responsibilities by themselves. It made them bear the double burden, sometimes triple burden, but attitudinal studies have shown that women, in their self-perception, were equal to men and makers of their life. Soviet gender order was centered on the participation of women in labor force and a number of labor legislations were followed to keep this gender order in place. The transition changed the foundation of this gender order fundamentally and suddenly. A few years preceding the collapse, calls to send women back to their ‘natural mission’ intensified till capitalist paradigm reinstated the public/private split ideologically and through legislations.

In chapter three we have taken note of shifts in state policies vis-à-vis organizing production along capitalist free-market economy and its resultant impact on macro indicators of women’s participation in the emerging economy of Russia. A part of conditionalities imposed by WB/IMF as a precondition to loans was deregulating labor
market, changing labor codes and restructuring employment profile. Neo-liberal discourse was replete with an ideological and cultural backlash against the erstwhile Soviet socialist system. Democratic freedom had arrived for women mainly in the form of ‘freedom from doing paid work’ and consumer choices filling up the market place. Most women were plunged into deepest poverty and faced a crisis of survival and had no freedom to choose to not work. In the changing circumstances neither the state, private market nor the enterprises, which were left in no state, are willing to bear the brunt of what was publicly proclaimed as women’s ‘natural’ familial roles or costs of social reproduction. Women are being forced to work in new forms of informal economy in casual, part-time, sometimes in more than two jobs to make ends meet. These jobs have come with no benefits, no job security, exploitative working conditions and often with blatant sexism.

The trends of sex based differentials in current labor market in Russia have intensified across all sectors. Women are the first to be fired as they are deemed ‘least productive’ labor force with attendant costly burdens for companies. The unemployed duration for women has become longer and taking maternity leave makes coming back into a job much more difficult for women. Gender wage gap have widened considerably to the extent that a majority of women, despite their qualified experience and educational background have rarely found wage rise as an incentive for job mobility. This is another reason why women, encumbered with their domestic duties, have displayed a much lower tendency for occupational mobility. The sectors, like trade, accounting, banking and so on, predominated by women in Soviet times are now more ‘male-dominated’ as they have become more lucrative with finance economy becoming the chief engine of growth. Women find themselves with fewer opportunities to retrain themselves and even then have lesser ‘black market’ business experience and acumen to bank upon to make a mark in the new upcoming sectors. They find themselves outside business and information network which strengthen individual workers bargaining position and are left usually alone and therefore more vulnerable to exploitation by their employers. Consequently, women are seen in informal economy in large numbers which is overshadowed with criminal networks and has numerous small firms which survive with the means of illegal
maneuverings and underpaying employees working under ‘shadow contracts.’ Women, with their creativity, resilience and past leadership experience are able to carve a small space for themselves called ‘niche economy’ which however offers them neither security nor stability.

Feminist economists like Benaria (2001) have pointed towards the indispensable linkages between formal and informal economy, whereby the exploitative and illegal informal economy is maintained by the formal sector to enhance their profits. Therefore it is less likely that the supposition that once formal economy is stabilized and expands informal economic activities will reduce to finally disappear. Especially in contemporary Russia, where capitalism itself will take a much longer duration to take shape, it is more probable that the share of informal economy in national GDP will remain substantial and women will continue to work in this sector to meet their survival needs. The sphere of ‘production’ in the restricted sense of computed economic activities has undergone fundamental restructuring to reinforce ‘natural’ patriarchal division of labor, attendant with its ideology of separate spheres of activities for men and women.

Women heading households, particularly single mothers have lost incalculably and occupy the lowest rungs of Russian society. The ideal rational individual standing in the center of neo-liberal conception is a young, healthy, white male who is free to make optimum choices, take initiatives, display entrepreneurial skills and exhibit most rational behavior to maximize profits. Women, children, old age people, other ethnicities are all marginal to this liberal picture of an unfolding happy capitalist future. While other sections of the population like children and old people have lost on state benefits and securities and have become vulnerable, women are the biggest loosers in the paradigm shift ushered in by the transition. These trends have given rise to the phenomenon of feminization of poverty in Russia today. Not only have they lost on jobs, benefits, securities, economic independence and the consequent freedom to take decisions on personal matters like marriage, divorce; they are also under an ideological pressure to conform to the traditional identity of a patriarchal dependent wife/mother.
These trends in the labor market are based upon larger restructuring and reallocation of tasks and resources in the sphere of social reproduction. Integrally linked, dependent on each other, both spheres are colluding to 'correct' the 'Soviet deviation' in the gender roles performed by women. In the following chapter four, we looked at the linkages between global capitalism and how it is entrenched and played out in the processes and tasks of social reproduction.

The section amongst women, which has been the most vulnerable and has been the biggest looser in the transition, is that of single mothers. Soviet gender contract entailed an elaborate arrangement of child care and maternity benefits which were often routed through the enterprises where women worked. The enterprises, especially in mono-industrial towns, provided crèches, bakeries and many other such facilities to parents with children, along with a long drawn system of maternity leaves, sick leaves and benefits till the child reached a certain age. Amongst the 'rules' that were formulated to usher in the transition, one of the important condition was to do away with such expensive and elaborate encumbrances upon the upcoming new market players in order to make them more competitive and economically rational, efficient and viable.

Underlying the high pitched discourse of 'economic efficiency' and 'merit' was the assumption that it was not the responsibility of the market economy to accommodate and bear such 'private' burdens. Elaboration of this argument was that such 'dependency' in any case induced laziness, parasitism, and inefficiency in the working people. It was posed rhetorically whether this wasn't the main reason for low productivity and stagnation of the Soviet economy? Therefore, it was necessary to 'wean' away the pampered population and turn the 'nanny or maternal' state back to its strong, masculine roots. Russian women and men had availed of the public infrastructural support to manage the tasks of social reproduction as a matter of their rights and as a matter of society's responsibility towards rearing and nurturing its children. The shift now to what is called the 'culture of work' or 'responsibility' is a way of increasing the official scrutiny over those women who are forced to avail of whatever benefits they can to survive. The restrictions on the conditions of getting such benefits are increasing, even as cash amounts, to meet the demographic challenge, are becoming higher.
Many enterprises continued to provide such infrastructural support in the years following the collapse despite mounting pressure from international monetary institutions and the Russian government. But by the end of the decade of 90s, most of these enterprises folded completely. Most of the state infrastructure of crèches, kindergartens, and children’s primary schools has either shut down or their property is used for more lucrative business. Some have gone private and introduced fees, which particularly single mothers, facing destitution, can hardly afford. Statistics show a tremendous drop in the number of children going into such child care facilities that exist today.

Women who are heading households and are sole earning members also form a large part of who are today called Russia’s ‘new poor.’ The survival strategies taken up by women, creative and courageous in themselves, in no way minimize the terribly oppressive force of state-market mediated structures that are actively colluding to send women back into the ‘private domain.’ It is not surprising that professions like prostitution, pornography and sex trade are the most easily available means of earning cash. The sky rocketing rate of HIV infections in women and other venereal diseases most commonly found in young girls today is an indication of the desperation of women who are trapped suddenly into this pernicious reality.

The explosion of pornography and young blue eyed teen girls available for prostitution was one face of the transition. From a ‘sexless’ gender identity of the Soviet era to a heavily sexualized post-collapse Russian gender identity marked a shift whose implications are still unraveling for women in Russia. Chapter five looked at the ways in which constructions of Russian femininity and masculinity are undergoing a change under the aegis of big capital that has flooded the most lucrative and quick profit yielding sectors with sex industry as one of the prominent ones in an open economy. Along with liberal democracy and big capital, Russians also received ‘sexual liberation,’ an integral element of western lifestyle, as perceived by them. The emerging discourse of identity politics is relatively recent, whereby different social groups are vying for shrinking state resources.
Identity politics as the possible basis of political mobilization for women is a possibility that is slowly taking shape in conditions of scarcity and deepening problems being encountered by women. Sexist attitudes were not unknown in Soviet times but the openly misogynist and hostile attitudes that are being normalised in Russia’s culture now has perhaps made women acutely aware of their gender identity. Facing sexual exploitation because of being a woman has somewhat also strengthened identity claims and has presented gender identity of women as the possible pole to rally around their resistance. However, the success and challenges to this strategy of Russian women’s movement is yet to be seen, one thing is becoming clearer which is that these identity claims are very amenable to political manipulations by varied political forces vying with each other for political power and control. This is partly also because the identities that are being constructed by a confluence of the interests of the forces of big capital, market, religio-nationalist revival, political parties, mass media and popular culture are not always democratic or all inclusive of the said communities. For instance, the gender identity of women that is being refashioned today in Russia is simultaneously a process of exclusion of various ‘deviant’, ‘dependent’ and other such women. Even though there are contradictions between conceptions of the ‘ideal Russian woman,’ they serve more the purpose of demarcating one political formation from another. Often a consensus exists between, otherwise competing constructs, on straitjacketing ‘all’ women into the traditional patriarchal hierarchies.

The processes that are actively contributing towards reshaping women’s identities have been unanimous in displacing ‘work’ as a central component of their previous Soviet identity. The juxtaposition of the image of dull, lifeless, masculinized, weary and heavy machinery operating unattractive Soviet woman with an attractive, vivacious, well groomed, soft, feminine and fashionable young Russian woman is also a contest between the ‘dull socialist past’ and a ‘glamorous western future.’ The contrast and its terms are carefully arranged to present ‘feminist’ and ‘feminine’ as mutually exclusive. It suggests that to want to work and earn your living is being unfeminine and coarse. The sense of loss expressed by many women has its linkages with not just the material loss of a secure life and work but more profoundly it is a sense of redundancy of their educational and
work background in rapidly shifting market conditions. Replying to interviews which
stress "no hangups" as part of the job description leaves women trying to sum up their
life experiences into good looks and willingness to sleep with their employers. This
refashioning project goes straight through the 'spike heeled footsteps' of hard currency
prostitute splayed across newspapers, magazines, internet and in popular culture. Current
political discourse in Russia is also heavily sexualized with the aggressive and victorious
man, who is also the groom, in control as the ruler with the nation posited as his willing
bride exhorting her man to do something and to be strong. The political opposition is cast
into the mould of weak, effeminate or a dependent woman in need of control.

Sensationalisation and normalisation of pornography and prostitution in Russia is
revealed by the fact that 60% of girls (Avgerinos 2006) in a school in Moscow cited
prostitution as their preferred profession because of the money and glamour. The lure of
freely expressing their sexuality, experimenting with sexual orientation and giving vent to
desires is understandable in a country with a rather repressive history in this realm.
However, it is proving to be a costly freedom since this 'femininity' is divested of any
political substance and having appropriated the content and slogans of feminist demands,
it proceeds to put this image in the service of the market which almost never has worked
to the advantage or empowerment of women anywhere in the world. The resulting
objectification and commodification of women's bodies and sexuality has deepened the
misogynist attacks that women face in poplar culture, the streets, workplaces and their
homes. While the sex industry thrives, women are more urgently then ever caught up
with the need to formulate a response and a political strategy to wrest their 'identity' back
from hegemonic patriarchal interests.

The debates amongst feminists are taking shape amidst their new encounters with
western feminist theories and their own historical experience and present life conditions.
While state control and scrutiny are legitimately suspect and opposed, it does leave
unchecked the exploitative and dangerous consequences for women of rising prostitution
and other related branches of sex trade. It is indeed a challenge for women to formulate
their position keeping in mind both aspects of this pernicious patriarchal exploitation.
Philipson outlined the framework which can potentially be useful in evaluating and
formulating a strategy for resistance for Russian feminists. Philipson (1984: 118) elaborated that, "...in a society characterized by male domination it is impossible to want just freedom, on the one hand, or just protection, on the other. As long as women are routinely raped and battered, and such rape and battering are 'naturalized' and glorified in pornography, prostitution and mainstream media, as long as women are systematically denied equal access to jobs and earn half of what men do, and as long as women have primary responsibility for child rearing, which often causes them to live in poverty, protection is a necessary feminist demand. This does not mean we should not simultaneously work for independence and liberation from the forces that cause us to seek protection. It also does not mean that the questions of sexual fulfillment, pleasure, and excitement should be absent from feminist discourse. It does mean, however, that we should abandon simple-minded, exclusionary categories in the discussion of sexuality and begin the difficult task of understanding the connections between behaviour and fantasy, sexual expression and object relations, and sexual activity and ideology."

This is a challenge that awaits Russian feminists who seem to be grappling with either-or side of this debate as it is shaping up in their country. It makes the task of forging gender identity based in sexuality that much more difficult from the point of view of forging a unifying subject which can take political action. The processes underway in Russia today also warn us against deploying sexuality as the means to some ultimate truth and liberation and it being identified as the core of human identity.

The potential to invest political content in a gender identity constituted by hegemonic patriarchal forces makes it that much more difficult for any feminist agenda to ground in it an emancipatory potential. The deployment of gender ideology to organize competing visions of the nation also plays a crucial role in the contest for political control and power. The processes of inclusion and exclusion that underwrite boundaries of the nation are often across the symbolic and real bodies of women. In the last chapter of our research, we looked at the nationalist and immigration discourse which are actively seeking to draw the borders of the Russian nation in the renewed socio-economic and political international reality. Both these discourses feed upon each other to reinforce the marginalization of the 'other' from any claim to the nation's resources. Women and
gender hierarchies are fundamental to this project of redrawing the national map and
demarcation from the remaining world. Gender ideologies have been prominent in the
transition that took place across countries of the former ‘socialist’ bloc and former Soviet
Union. They continue to be prominent as new nation-states grapple with the crisis of
national identity and the need to be distinct from others. Consolidating the family and
traditional patriarchal ‘natural’ hierarchies has been the cornerstone of these nationalist
ideologies that have been re-born through the transition.

An important part of the transition has been Russian women’s immigration to
countries abroad. These women have high educational and skilled backgrounds and are
often in search for jobs. Another set of women are those who have been drawn into sex
trade and are legally or illegally taken to service male clients across the Russian borders.
The number of women from former ‘socialist bloc’ is very large and many of the women
involved are often subjected to violence on the streets. The large number of Russian
women who immigrated to Scandinavian countries, Israel, Europe, Canada and America
have been subjected to negative stereotypes and forced deskilling in destination countries.

Russian women migrating abroad face an immigration discourse which
stereotypes them into ‘promiscuous’ women with dubious practices such as high divorce
rates, non-religiosity, low birth rate and so on. Not only are they forced to re-train
themselves into jobs much less than the skills they already have, they are also forced to
prove their chastity at every turn. The predominant image of a single Russian woman is
that she is on the look out for a husband and can easily have sex. This imagery makes her
an easy target of other women’s suspicions and violence in the streets. The description in
mass media of Russians immigrating to Israel and Scandinavia as ‘hordes, waves, floods’
induces a fear in the population of being taken over by the alien ‘outsiders.’ Add to this
the descriptions of ‘deviant’ sexuality of Russian women out to seduce the pristine
natural order and tranquility compounds the process of ‘othering’ and alienation.
Stringent scrutiny over the inflow of immigrants by way of controlling women’s
behaviour and sexuality also performs the important function of regulating and
controlling the women of destination country.
While women are subject to controls and scrutiny in destination countries, nationalist discourse back home reinforces the gender hierarchies by focusing on internal inclusion and exclusions. As women in Russia are dispossessed from political power, jobs and resources of the nation, they are more and more glorified in the nationalist iconography as ‘Holy Mother Russia’ and ‘Virgin Mary,’ pure and chaste. The motherland, earth and a woman’s body and her womb are tied into one pristine whole that needs to be kept pure, defended against external invasion and kept under control against her ‘natural’ propensity to sexually ‘deviate.’ The recasting of gender identity of women as soft and feminine, vulnerable and helpless, chaste and modest is not averse to market manipulation for profits either. The confluence of nationalists, Orthodox religious order and market have fashioned this set of new identities for women. It remains to be seen how feminists can wrest their identity back to refashion it along their genuine democratic and emancipatory aspirations.

At the end of our research we concluded that women have lost out in the Russian transition. This is not because what they had in the previous regime was an ideal resolution but because the terms of this agenda have fundamentally changed. And they have changed towards a neo-liberal capitalist direction. The unresolved issues of democracy, sexual division of labor, sexual and reproductive freedom and continuing cultural biases in society have now been replaced with the challenge of reclaiming the right to paid work, right to social securities and infrastructure for tasks of social reproduction, protection from violence and degrading sexist sexual practices. The agenda of expanding and complicating the relationship between realms of production and realm of reproduction has been replaced with traditional patriarchal public/private split organizing sexual division of labour. The scope of integrating women as full citizens of a country without overt state control, interference and scrutiny has been replaced with a state that has abdicated all roles from social sector and is in active confluence with forces of big capital and the market to consolidate its power. Democracy is still awaited in Russia as the state consolidates itself into an even more gigantic, oppressive and centralizing force. Political democracy is as yet notional as the absence of any robust and dynamic opposition reveals. In such conditions, amidst chaos and apparent stability, the
Historic collectivist legacy and memory of Russian women has the unique potential to destabilize the consolidating patriarchal consensus. Any turn away from the current neoliberal individualist future to hammer out a political agency that demands a future with emancipation of women as its integral agenda has enormous potentials in the Russian conditions.

There might be every reason to hope for the possibility to explore, in totally new ways, a return to a socialist-feminist agenda in Russia. Elaborating on the difficulties that await the future development of capitalism in Russia and the potential for reemergence of socialism Singh (2006: 578) aptly points that, “Seventy odd years of experiment in socialism, this historical past, makes the social and ideological terrain for trying to establish a capitalist system in Russia fundamentally different from that in other parts of the world where capitalism has consolidated itself. The restoration of capitalism in Russia is not to be confused with the privatization in England or France, or India, which is a process within an existing capitalist system. It is an unprecedented venture in history, unprecedented for being a venture in a society that has experienced socialism, however deformed this socialism may have been. This has its implications for the future of both capitalism and socialism in Russia. Obviously these implications are negative for capitalism (its such basic norms as private property, profit motive, possessive individualism etc.) and favourable for the socialist option in the future”. Amongst the new directions that Russian women will move to in their attempt to search for genuine democratic emancipation, it would not be too farfetched to hope that one of these paths will lead to a more meaningful practice of socialist-feminism. It would be to this direction that perhaps Russian women will turn to in their search for a future that has been envisioned, participated and worked for by them. Today, there is a greater scope of interaction and sharing between diverse currents of women’s movement internationally. It would be mutually very instructive for the feminist agenda to stand in solidarity with our Russian sisters as they attempt to fight back for their future.