

# Class and gender in Russian welfare policies: Soviet legacies and contemporary challenges

av

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Akademisk avhandling

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## ABSTRACT

**Title:** Class and gender in Russian welfare policies: Soviet legacies and contemporary challenges

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The general aim of this thesis is to explore the gendered and classed nature of social work and social welfare in Russia to show how social policy can be a part of and reinforce marginalisation. The overall research question is in what ways class and gender are constructed in Russian social work practice and welfare rhetoric through Soviet legacies and contemporary challenges? In addition, which actors contribute to the constitution of social work values and how this value system affects the agency of the clients? This study focuses on contradictory ideologies that are shaped in discursive formations of social policy, social work training and practice. It is a qualitative study, containing five papers looking at this issue from three different perspectives: policy and institutions, culture and discourse, actors and identity. The data collection was arranged as a purposive–iterative process. The empirical material consists of qualitative interviews with social work practitioners, administrators and clients, participant observations in social services and analysis of documents of various kinds.

The results show that modernisation of social life under socialism was concerned with the internalisation of new forms of discipline, standards of everyday life, collectivist values and beliefs in equality which impacted on public and private domains, including social services provision (*Paper I*), which was of a classed and gendered nature. The post-Soviet welfare policy is characterised by the legacies of conservative thinking and lack of discretion in social work as a profession, excessive institutionalising of children and suppression of the voices of vulnerable people. Low income parents become the objects of governmental control, and existing forms of social policy act towards fastening them in vulnerable position. Additional pressure is on those families who raise children with disabilities and on parents who have disability themselves. Stigma affects a parent on a deep emotional level and has social implications for her and the child. Thus, the politics of exclusion at the institutional level flows to the level of personal experience and everyday practice (*Paper II*). Parenting is a cultural and classed experience by liberal welfare policy, which can reinforce marginalisation through institutional structures and discourses. The discursive and narrative practices are important cultural resources used by the parents to understand their personal lives and by service providers who create their own understandings of social problems (*Paper V*). The structural context of social work is constituted by inequality in the social order, which is mirrored in the conditions of the labour market. The problems of a client might be an outcome of beliefs in traditional gender roles and traditional family definitions, which supposes inequality and subordination of women. In addition, models of social work practice often admit such a definition and, therefore, worsen the condition of women (*Paper IV*). The contemporary situation in social work in Russia is featured by under-professionalisation and thereby a low degree of autonomy, absence of critical reflection of social work practice, and rigidity of governance (*Paper III*). This is the background where initiatives to change the existing social order can hardly be seen. However, social workers are gradually acquiring new knowledge and skills to effect social change in a democratic egalitarian mode rather than following the paternalist scheme of thought and action.