

## **The capital of beauty at work: Russian women's negotiation of unspoken rules**

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### **Abstract**

The political transition in Russia in the early 1990s initiated a series of socio-cultural shifts as the population, particularly in urban areas, was gaining access to consumer goods and services unavailable under communism. The celebration of rising consumerism had its gender dimension. Women had come to view self-beautification as a means for them to return to their 'natural' femininity, supposedly lost under Soviet State's policy of gender equality combined with the lack of support for working mothers and chronic shortages. Drawing on interviews with women from Moscow, this paper interrogates the interviewees' negotiation of their identities of an employee and a woman in the post-Soviet context. Although women's accounts do suggest that beauty becomes a form of socially valuable 'capital' if they can afford to invest in it, the paper argues that such investment cannot be conceptualised simply as an unproblematic, mechanical transaction. While seeking to 'utilise' their femininity and beauty, women may face sexist assumptions about their inability to be both feminine and professionally competent. Even having access to the capital of education and an established career, women may still engage in practices that simultaneously promise the path to self-perfection and perpetuate the idea that the female body is innately flawed.

**Key words:** the 'field' of work, unspoken rules, the 'capital' of beauty, Russian women

### **The legacy of gender inequality in post-Soviet Russia**

In 1991, the seventy-year old history of the country known as the Soviet Union came to an end. The Russian Federation, the official successor of the Soviet state, entered a phase of transition which David Lane has defined as 'a passage from one set of circumstances, institutions, values and ways of doing things' to another (1995: xiv). The changes in politics and economy revealed disparities in the social positions of women and men. Women were under-represented in politics and business, but women constituted the majority of the country's poor and long-term unemployment (Shvedova 2001: 282; Rzhantsuina 1998: 4). The legacy of the gender pay gap<sup>1</sup> and the under-representation of women in positions of leadership in Soviet

politics and industries<sup>2</sup> formed a barrier to women's participation in entrepreneurship and the redistribution of national wealth through privatisation during the economic reforms in the early-mid 1990s (Lapidus 1993: 156).

One of the paradoxes of the first post-Soviet decade was that when the majority of the population was still deep in poverty, individual traders and new privatised businesses began to import more consumer goods such as clothes that were hard to acquire in the past (e.g. Humphrey 2002). In post-Soviet Russia, a culture of mass consumption has been generally perceived by businesses and the public as a sign of the improvement of everyday life. As women's desire to attend to their appearance in the Soviet period was restricted by shortages of goods and the 'double burden' of their social duties, the greater availability of products acquired the meaning of a chance to finally devote some time to the self instead of attending to the needs of the family and the nation. Unsurprisingly, 'beauty' came to be associated with individual pleasure and the freedoms, firstly, from the state's control and, secondly, of consumer choice (Moskalenko 1996; Kay 1997).

In this paper, I will interrogate the seemingly unproblematic celebration of practices of self-beautification, focusing specifically on the ways that white-collar female employees negotiate *unspoken* rules concerning their self-presentation at the workplace. The discussion draws on the data collected in 2010 and 2012 in Moscow from individual interviews with 12 women in their 50s and focus groups with 19 women aged 26-57. Thinking through Michel Foucault's concept of 'disciplinary power' and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, I view norms of gender specific-behaviour at work not as imposed top-down on employees by managers, but as legitimised and negotiated through daily practices and interactions between co-workers.

This relational approach enables us to think about women's navigation of both the verbalised and more tacit rules of femininity at work as a process that is firstly, ongoing, secondly, context-specific and thirdly, central to the formation of gendered subjectivities. In a given situation or context, employees would be provided with a specific set of resources which would determine their negotiation of gender and professional identities (Halford & Leonard 2006: 8-10). Importantly, this negotiation is not performed by some pre-existing gendered subjects; rather, the act of negotiation is constitutive of working women's gendered subjectivities (see for example Butler 1993). Therefore, I will apply these theoretical theses to the parts of

interviews where the women talk about the significance of the constructs of ‘femininity’ and ‘beauty’ to their identities of ‘woman’ and ‘professional.’

### **Research Methods and the Participants**

My analysis in this paper draws on the data collected during two short research trips to Moscow in 2010 and 2012. The participants were recruited primarily through my social networks. I quickly discovered that people were more likely to agree to speak about their gender identities and bodily practices if I was introduced to them by someone they knew personally. The use of personal contacts and snowball sampling attracted a number of participants and made them feel more at ease during conversations. But these types of recruiting techniques also determined the cohort of the interviewees. They reflected my own demographics, namely they were white, (predominately) ethnic Russian, heterosexual, residing in the capital city, with higher education and (mainly) in white-collar jobs.

I collected the data through individual semi-structured and group interviews. In 2010, I conducted 12 one-on-one interviews with women in their 40s-50s. And in 2012, I complemented these data with 5 separate focus groups divided by age: 3 groups with women in their late 30s-50s and 2 groups with women in their late 20s. I opted for focus groups because I wanted to observe women’s interactions with one another when they talked about their beauty practices. Also, the need for such data was indicative in the preliminary analysis of the 12 initial interviews, primarily because of the recurring references interviewees made to their female colleagues, friends and relatives.

The occupations of the participants of interviewees ranged from: a financial director, a general manager, an IT engineer, an accountant, a buyer (two women), a secretary, and a private tutor, to a yoga instructor, a dance teacher, a freelance artist, and a part-time receptionist/seamstress. In the groups of women in their late 30s-50s, 4 women worked as public servants for a local government, 4 women worked in a kindergarten, 2 women were retired, 1 worked as a part-time maid, and 1 was an accountant. In the two groups of younger women, 2 women were in between jobs, 3 worked as junior managers/personal assistant (PA), 1 was a credit analyst and 1 co-owned a nail salon. Most interviewees chose not to disclose their income so I focused primarily on the subjective evaluations of their status and position within the workplace.

### **The losses and profits from ‘beauty capital’**

As was cogently argued by Foucault (1979: 200-201), power in modern society often relies little on force. There are tacit, inter-subjective mechanisms that help to produce desirable behaviours and forms of self-presentation. For the purposes of this study, I look beyond the strictures of office policy and examine how female colleagues monitor one another in daily interactions in ways that are intimately tied to their own grooming practices. Added to this approach, I use Bourdieu’s ([1984] 2010: 201) seminal study of class distinctions to shed light on the way that self-grooming also figures as an investment in a particular kind of asset that may be used to pursue different ends, in the workplace setting. Beauty may thus be considered as a means of gaining what Bourdieu termed ‘symbolic and material profits’.

Dasha, a 51 year-old, senior manager, reveals how her attention to the presentation of her body was caught up with the expectations she had for the appearances of her work colleagues, and provides an example of the kinds of interactive monitoring processes that occur in the workplace. This is evident in the following excerpt: ‘I think that if you work in the field of [finance], when you are always visible to people, you should take [grooming] very seriously. It’s a very big plus when you always appear cared-for [*uhozhennui*] and have got a haircut...manicure and everything’ (individual interview, 2010). Kristina, a 26 year-old Personal Assistant, provided an example — in her narration of her mother’s transformation — of how investment in one’s beauty can reap dividends. Initially, as Kristina explained, her mother ‘had never bothered with any beauty care up till forty-five...never used any cream’ but crossing that age line she ‘stopped liking her reflection in the mirror.’ Following advice of a cosmetologist, the mother decided to get ‘Botox’ injections in the areas of her face that were ‘problematic.’ The result was positive and, as Kristina believed, it ‘boosted mum’s confidence.’ This was particularly important for the mother’s career as she wanted to feel and present herself at work ‘not as a granny’ but as ‘an energetic woman.’ For Kristina’s mother, cosmetic procedures were an investment into, what I call, ‘the capital of beauty’. Due to its value in the (post-Soviet) business world Kristina’s mother and other women could expect an easy conversion of this type of capital into other resources such as employment, business success or useful connections.

However, comments from some of the interviewees help to condition the notion that there may be unproblematic transactions between forms of capital. For, despite having socio-economic

(education, work position) or symbolic (heterosexuality) power, the concern about their appearance can override the confidence derived from professional competence. For instance, Dasha, quoted above, believed that it was ‘hard work’ to be a woman ‘in this society, at work and in the family’, and ‘If you are a woman you must never relax [in terms of beauty care].’ Her regular and meticulous grooming practices demonstrate the difficulties she faces in negotiating her position as a female manager. Although she had successfully adapted to the requirements of self-discipline in the workplace, the benefits promised in exchange for an enormous ‘beauty’ effort and constant self-monitoring appeared incredibly fragile, threatening to fade away once beauty care is performed less religiously and regularly.

A work place can establish written rules about how women should dress and present themselves but it is never spelled out that they have to be less or more feminine to fit into the culture of their workplace (e.g. Neftyanoi Blog 2009). The interview data shows, however, that modelling oneself after a particular ‘type’ of femininity was a central pursuit of some of the interviewees in this study. As Olesya (27 year-old, credit analyst), interviewed with two other women, explained:

When [a woman] works with men to achieve the top she has to do that [hide her femininity-M.D.], so that men would see her as equal, not as beautiful and empty-headed but as one of equals (group interview, 2012).

Say, there are pretty young [...] who want to succeed in the area of their [professional] activity... [if] their femininity becomes an obstacle, they possibly do something with their appearance to [present] themselves not as feminine women but as smart, driven [individuals] (Alla, 27 years-old, in-between jobs, group interview, 2012).

These quotes reveal some of the *unspoken* rules of gendered self-presentation, namely an association of femininity with the body and of masculinity with the mind. Here, femininity figures as a ‘trait’ that could not co-exist with the qualities most valued in a white-collar work environment (e.g. intelligence, motivation). In response to such contradiction, Alla (27 years-old, in-between jobs) had developed a pragmatic approach to gestures or facial expressions that they believed were typical for a ‘woman’. Alla spoke about a situation at work when she ‘used’ her femininity to affect the behaviour, and outcome of an interaction with her male boss.

I can't call myself super feminine but in some situations I've really used [femininity]. I was once in a tricky situation, I had to talk to my male boss about me leaving the company. I'd always presented myself at work as an employee, not as a young feminine woman or a super brutish, decisive woman who flings the door open with a kick. But when I had to talk to him [...], I intuitively turned my femininity on, I downcast my eyes and was all timid and cat-like. I immediately noticed how his attitude to me changed...he started talking quieter, looking for some special words, I was smiling and playing a girlie girl and he...behaved with more tenderness.

In retrospect, Alla was able to reflect on how, despite the opposition of the feminine to intellect at work, there still was a space to utilise femininity to her own advantage. In this comment femininity figured primarily as a certain type of behaviour, body language, facial and verbal expressions. Judith Butler's (1990) interpretation of gender as a performative act suggests that femininity and masculinity are illusionary constructs created through our repeated performances of certain roles and practices which are considered appropriate for 'women' or 'men'. From this perspective, Alla's subconscious use of body language to emulate what she considered 'feminine' would be suggestive of the instability of gender as a cultural construct as well as of a possibility of its 'undoing' or subversion.

Although established gender stereotypes at work could be challenged, potential 'symbolic and material' losses for female employees could be too high to even try. They could miss out on a job, chance for a promotion, or strain relationships with senior staff and colleagues. Given such risks, some women might seek to justify and trivialise situations, for instance, where a woman's appearance rather than her competence and skills determine success of a job interview. In Bourdieu's terms, women have to reflexively manage their appearance, behaviour and responses in the field of work in accordance with the 'constraints and demands of the game' (1990: 63). This was exemplified by a comment from Maria (57 years-old, financial director), who was interviewed individually:

In general, an appearance has a great influence on whether one gets a job or not [...] I know, for example, there had been instances when women would come to an interview and it was conducted by men, and they [men] would select [female employees] based on their appearance, and sometimes they did not like something. [And do you agree with

that? - M.D.] It's an individual approach, he [top manager] doesn't report to anyone...He can always find an excuse, he can say, like, her working experience was insufficient.

The selection of employees based on one's personal preferences is unlikely to be spelled out in a position description. The lack of accountability of managers for such abuse of professional power means that female candidates and employees have access to little or no formal tools to challenge discriminatory practices that might be masked by vague explanations like 'insufficient experience' or obscure concepts of 'dress-code' and 'business culture'. It seems that, in general, the lesson that the interviewed women had learnt at their white-collar workplaces is that their presence and some degree of authority were tolerated but only on the condition that they accepted the effects of what R.W. Connell (2002: 142) has termed 'patriarchal dividend', or 'an advantage to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order'.

## **Conclusion**

The accounts discussed here point to a paradox that while the women seemed to accept narrow gender stereotypes as a norm or truth, they also learnt to manipulate body language and behaviours they associated with excessive femininity. The purpose and effectiveness of such manipulation depended on a given situation that determined what resources a female employee could draw on; these ranged from existing rapport with co-workers or managers to monetary investment into cosmetic procedures. The women's comments do suggest the complexity of their navigation of unspoken rules at work. But they also suggest that the women sought to utilise 'femininity' not so much to gain 'symbolic and material profits' but to avoid symbolic and material *losses* that could arise from their appearing either un-feminine or incompetent.

At the same time, functional attitudes to femininity can be considered both symptomatic of the inferior status given to the feminine/female body *and* constitutive of women's gender and professional identities. The purposeful presentation of the self as overly compliant and passive to an overtly masculine male boss, for instance, is not an act performed by to the complete and fixed gender subject. Rather, each such performance can be seen as a re-interpretation of what it is to be a woman and an employee.

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#### Footnotes

1. According to sociologist Svetlana Aivazova (2001), in the 1980s, industries responsible for the production of food, textile and medication were dominated by women. Since these industries were 'feminised' the wages were only around 60% of the country's average, with women within the industry receiving less than 60% of the wages of their male co-workers (Aivazova 2001: 294).
2. The number of female members in the Supreme Soviet began to drop in the 1980s after the policy of quotas for certain groups of the population was ceased. It dropped from 33% in 1984 to 15.6% in 1989 (Shineleva 1990: 111). It is important to note that the Supreme Soviet had no real decision-making power. The Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Politburo, where the course of politics was really defined, had only one female member throughout the Soviet period — the minister of culture, Ekaterina Furtseva. In the 1990s, women continued to be under-represented on decision-making levels in business, 3-5% in large companies (1995) and politics, 9-10% in the Parliament (1996-1999) (Shvedova 2001: 282).