Young Married Women in the Russian Countryside: Women's Networks, Communication and Power

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Abstract

This essay explores the experiences of recently married young women living in rural Russia in the village of Karsun in the Ul'yanovsk *Oblast'*. It analyses the connections between women in rural communities looking at social networks and the power relations inherent within them. The ways in which forms of power among and between women (as well as between women and men) impact on young women's agency are critically appraised through an analysis of what this essay terms forms of 'women's power'. The essay also shows how women's discussions of their experiences reflect the problems that the perceived physical and emotional absences of men present for younger married women and their attempts to develop forms of autonomy.

THE ESSAY ADDRESSES A GAP IN EXISTING RESEARCH ON informal networks as livelihood strategies through a focus on the use of networks as a strategy to overcome the constraints of married life for young women in rural areas. It highlights the ways in which gendered norms not only give young women differential access to networks, but that networks create both opportunities and constraints for women.[1] In addition, the research focuses particularly on networks of women, revealing how gender norms ascribing women's roles as mothers and wives lead women to form networks with other women for material and emotional support. However, these networks are also often fraught with internal power relations between women, particularly those at different ages and life stages. This essay thus focuses on the analysis of the under-researched area of young women's use of networks after marriage as a livelihood strategy and site of contested empowerment.

The focus on rural areas also provides an insight into the role of networks for livelihoods in one of the most problematic spheres of life in contemporary Russia—the Russian countryside, which is experiencing deep social and economic crisis. This crisis is not only a result of the destruction of Soviet collective forms of labour activity (collective farms and state farms), but is also due to the low standard of living of the rural population, the weakening of the social relations that were previously characteristic of the Russian countryside and the devaluation of associated socio-cultural values (Lylova

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This essay was translated from the original Russian by Vikki Turbine.

[1]See Ashwin and Yakubovich (2005) on how women's access and roles in networks differ from men.

2003; Shanin 1999). In the period of reform after the collapse of the Soviet Union (between 1990 and 2000), the level of village residents in paid employment fell from 95% to 40% in relation to average Russians (Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe 1999). Wages in agriculture are now amongst the lowest in the Russian economy and there is an increasing disparity between the levels of pay in this sphere and other sectors; for example, in comparison with heavy industry wages are over three times lower (Rossiiskii statisticheskii ezhegodnik 2009). Low wages have resulted in decreasing levels of motivation for work in paid employment and a shift of work and material resources to domestic production (Lylova 2003). A wealth of research (Nefedova & Treivish 2001; Hanson & Bradshaw 2000; Clarke 2002; White 2004) has shown that the gap between living standards in villages and towns has grown larger than the differences between regions (White 2004), and that much of life in the small rural settlements remains 'Soviet' in character (White 2005, p. 430). It is not surprising then that migration from the countryside to neighbouring towns or larger industrial centres has become for many an important livelihood strategy (White 2007; Walker 2010).

As a result of this decline, young people living in the rural areas of Russia have experienced an especially difficult situation (Vereshchaka 2005). On the one hand, they are deprived of the opportunities to successfully reproduce the way of life of their parents, and on the other hand, young people living in rural areas have a lower standard of living in comparison with young people in the larger towns and major cities of Russia due to less access to resources (Zvonovskii & Belousova 2006). Young people seeking employment are particularly vulnerable as the transition to a market economy resulted in the collapse of job security in the countryside and the loss of employment for significant numbers. Towns have therefore traditionally gained workers as a result of migration from the countryside, particularly among young women. While out-migration among young people for work remains a key livelihood strategy, existing research has shown that this is often dependent on access to social networks and particularly kinship networks (Walker 2010). The reliance on kinship networks is said to be a result of the new difficulties associated with migration to larger towns or cities, for example, in finding start-up funds, an affordable place to live and also attempting to settle into life in the city and maintain some contact with family who remain in the countryside (Walker 2010; White 2007).

In addition to a lack of material opportunities, young people in rural areas often experience tension between the desire to reproduce 'traditional' family values and the desire to develop a career strategy to fulfil their needs for self-realisation and development.[2] In attempts to attain these aspirations, young people in rural areas usually choose one of two widespread livelihood strategies: either to reject the parental model and leave the village, which can be viewed as an innovative or active strategy to social and geographical mobility, or to adopt a strategy that reproduces the way of life of their parents, which often follows a 'neopatriarchal' gender order whereby certain

[2]In this essay, the terms 'traditional society' and 'traditional way of life' refer to the processes of reproduction of a particular set of values and ways of life exercised by parents and previous generations in the rural setting. In this project, these were manifested through the priority given to family values that included strict sexual and family moral codes, regulated not only from within the close family circle, but also from the rural community as a whole (although these moral codes often appear in practice to be flexible, and there are ways to bypass them as discussed later in this essay).

egalitarian relationships can exist but within a broader context where patriarchal norms prevail (Therborn 2004; Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2007; Goroshkov *et al.* 2007).[3]

These changes have resulted in young people employing many and differing strategies to overcome these difficulties, but the use of informal networks remains a key resource for accessing employment, migration and also for material and emotional support within the rural context.[4] While there has been much research on the use of informal networks as a survival strategy, there has been less focus explicitly on their use by young people and even less by young women (Walker 2010). However, Russian researchers have shown how in rural areas of Russia (excluding the extreme north and south regions, which have very different characteristics) women have been disadvantaged by demographic changes and an aging population. Women are disproportionately more among the elderly in rural areas due to the lower life expectancy of men, as well as due to out-migration by younger people. Vishnevskii *et al.* (2007, p. 33) estimate that 'every third resident of a village is an elderly woman'. In addition to lower life expectancy among men, men are often described as 'absent' because of their perceived and actual incapacity resulting from ill health, stress-related disorders and alcoholism that prevent them from participating fully in employment or family life (Rimashevskaya *et al.* 1999; Ashwin 2000a). Other research has pointed out that this changing social structure has resulted in a crisis of masculinity as men's roles in family life have diminished and where men are perceived to be failing to fulfil their ascribed gender role as 'breadwinner' and the main earner and provider for the family (Ashwin 2000b; Ashwin & Lytkina 2004; Kiblitskaya 2000). This has created a context where women have increasingly used informal networks as a livelihood strategy (Pickup & White 2003).

The research presented in this essay is generated from in-depth interviews with 20 young women aged between 19 and 29 years; all had been married for no more than five years and were living in the village of Karsun in Ul'yanovsk *Oblast'* at the time of the research in 2007. Research participants were recruited through snowballing techniques. Initial contact was made through acquaintances in Karsun and a local doctor, who acted as gatekeepers: they identified suitable potential participants, contacted them on my behalf and, with their permission, passed on their contact details. I subsequently contacted them to explain what their involvement in the study

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[3]The term 'livelihood strategies' is used in this essay instead of the more widespread term of 'survival strategies' to follow White's argument that there are particular hazards in using the term 'survival' to describe strategies in the post-communist context, as this implies that people have had to 'survive' post-communism, whereas they did not have to survive the Soviet period, they merely lived (White 2004, p. 109–10). In this essay, 'strategies' therefore not only refers to economic needs, but also reflects the longer term processes of searching for the means to achieve a desired life style or living standard, but in a context of limited opportunities and limiting cultural norms.

[4]Research conducted by M. Gorshkov in 2006 and 2007 shows various identifications among young people that impact on their strategies. These varied from those who prioritised having a family, to those who valued a good education, high status and an interesting job. In addition, some young people aspired to establish their own businesses whilst others were identified as 'hedonists' who seek only their own pleasures. A small number of young people also saw themselves as lacking any skills for future security. It is interesting to note that the proportions of young people interested in a higher education or establishing a business were similar in large cities (at 21%) and in provincial areas (where 20% of the young people were identified as being in this group) (Gorshkov *et al.* 2007).

would entail; I arranged an interview with the women who agreed to take part in the study, and asked them to write a diary during the period of research documenting their experiences of marriage and the role that women's social networks played in dealing with everyday life in a rural village context.[5] Other potential participants were identified and contacted through the women who agreed to take part in the study. In the interests of preserving anonymity, participants are identified by pseudonyms instead of real names.

All interviews were conducted in Karsun, and focused on women's experiences and perceptions of gender roles and how these influenced younger women's position in the village. The women were also asked about the strategies they employed in managing their everyday lives, with a particular focus on their communication with other women. The discussions of communicative networks revealed the importance of these networks both for economic and emotional support. However, the ambivalent nature of some contacts with women was also evident where they served to reinforce power relations between women of different ages and status. The data show that the young women demonstrated a general acceptance of the social norms, values, moral aims and representations of their in-laws, particularly in accepting the gendered division of labour in public, but in private these duties and obligations were contested. These findings reflect those of other studies (Wegren 1995; Ashwin & Lytkina 2004; Kiblitskaya 2000), that highlight how rural life is structured by patriarchal gender relations and describe Russian villages as a 'women's territory' as a consequence of population decline and male outmigration.

As they accepted a traditional gendered division of labour, the role of the men in the lives of the respondents, as a source of control and of frustration, was a dominant feature in their narratives of everyday life. However, it was the perceived and actual physical and emotional absence of men from daily family life that created particular challenges for the young women and led them to rely on communicative networks with women for all forms of support. Women's networks were viewed as an important resource for young women in providing emotional support to combat the isolation felt by the absence of interaction with their husbands, as well as access to financial assistance, information and advice helping them to negotiate the economic and social constraints of rural life. However, the networks between women revealed how they also acted to transfer an idea of appropriate female experience from generation to generation, often creating further tensions as a result of the power relations embedded within the networks. This essay considers whether young married women living in rural areas are able to use these networks to create a form of 'women's power' not only in relationships with other women, but also with their husbands.

The role of women's networks in the Russian countryside: considering the influence of gendered roles

A large body of research on women's strategies and sources of power in Russia has highlighted the continuing role of informal networks (Burawoy *et al.* 2000; Pickup & White 2003; Ashwin & Yakubovich 2005). Indeed, in rural areas, social networks have

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[5]For further discussion of the use of diaries for research, see Gladarev (2002).

been described as a key economic resource for all, especially in conditions of 'survival', with some authors arguing that these networks are also the basis of social capital in areas where, without the help of relatives, neighbours, friends and colleagues, it would be impossible to survive (Shanin 1999; Pickup & White 2003). Fadeeva (1999, p.184) also notes the specific functioning of 'interfamily networks', where a community of connected families exchange material benefits and services voluntarily; these actions are a continuation of traditions of collectivism, communality and mutual aid that persist in the countryside. Steinberg (2002) also notes that networks are a form of social support that are particularly important in rural areas for overcoming the difficulties associated with uncertainty of living standards, loneliness, limited access to cultural resources and fostering a sense of community.

However, this essay argues, in line with feminist analyses of the power dynamics within social networks, that networks provide both opportunities and limitations for women. Of particular relevance to this study are the findings by Nauck and Suckow (2006) who describe how networks facilitate specific intergeneration interactions and practices among women. In their analysis, intergenerational relationships, together with relations between men and women, constitute family relational groups, which produce collective goods for exclusive exploitation by their own members. However, the capacity to exercise individual choice within these relations is often limited, especially for women, and, in many societies, alternatives to working within the networks do not exist (Nauck & Suckow 2006). Nonetheless, Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2007, p. 69) argue that it is possible to identify certain aspects of 'the power of the weak' within these networks and relationships. They argue that in some cases, women are able to manipulate or indirectly influence those who in all other circumstances dominate power relations, such as older women or men. In order to understand the power relations between women, it is necessary to outline the ways in which wider gender orders impact on women's roles and relationships with each other.

According to Hannan (2006), a 'gender order' can be defined as the way society is organised around the roles, responsibilities, activities and contributions ascribed as gendered, whether applying to either women or men. This denotes what is expected of women and men. However, any 'gender order' is not fixed and it is possible to challenge and change it. Connell (1987) puts forward the idea of gender systems, which although flexible and contested, nevertheless form fairly institutionalised structures. Connell (1987) argues that these gender systems manifest themselves in work, power relations and in representations. These serve to create gender orders in a given society that organise relations between genders in a system of hierarchies in private and public spheres of life that refer to historically constructed patterns of power relations between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity, which become institutionalised in society (Connell 1987). Indeed, Connell (1987, p. 121) argues that the family is a key social institution where a given gender order is inscribed and contested: 'in no other institution are relationships so extended in time, so intensive in contacts, so dense in their interweaving of economics, emotion, power and resistance'.

In their characterisation of the contemporary Russian 'gender order' Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2007, p. 97) seem to follow Hannan in describing the gender order as a 'set of different gender regimes (or ways) created by actions and the strategy of the people that are carried out within the limits of set institutional conditions'. However,

Soviet conceptualisations of gender roles and relations continue to play a role in contemporary Russia. Even though official Soviet ideology did not match the reality of life for women, declarations of equality between men and women and commitment to the emancipation of women resulted in women playing a large role in public life and paid employment as well as holding ascribed responsibility for childcare and domestic affairs. This differs from other European contexts, where women's roles were predominantly associated with the private sphere (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2007; Rouhier-Willoughby 2008). Shlapentokh (1984) also argues that during the Soviet period, power relations between men and women in the private sphere could also be contested, as control over the domestic budget and everyday decisions about the family remained within women's responsibilities.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, initial optimism that there would be further liberalisation of life and commitment to equality faded, and existing research indicates that there has been a tendency towards the revival of patriarchal discourses that place men in a dominant social and economic position and seek to relegate women to the private sphere and the role of carer (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2007). However, while this research suggests that values are being reordered (Ashwin 2000b; White 2005), shifts towards what is perceived as a more progressive 'Western' model of gender relations evident in urban areas seems to undermine these claims, as women increasingly enjoy opportunities for individual choice and self-realisation. None-theless, in provincial areas where broader social and economic transformations are taking place more slowly, patriarchal discourses appear to have some resonance and research shows that women continue to be responsible for domestic work, care of children and other relatives and for ensuring the material welfare of the family. More progressive changes that have enabled many urban women to gain independence from these responsibilities also tend to be met with resistance from the typically more conservative residents in rural areas. Therborn (2004) has termed this kind of gender order an 'intermediate' gender order (a combination of post-patriarchal and neo-patriarchal gender norms) that is particularly constraining on women's choices. However, it is important to note that while certain commonalities of women's experiences in rural Russia are evident, it is important not to generalise a 'Russian society' that holds the same views (White 2005, p. 430). Bearing in mind these caveats, the existing research on the impact of gendered norms on women in rural areas shows that there are some commonalities in terms of the 'traditional' values that regulate gender roles in villages.

As shown by research on gender roles in post-Soviet Russia more broadly, for women in rural Russia responsibility for the family remains central to their ascribed role (Burawoy *et al.* 2000; Clarke 1999; Kiblitskaya 2000). These commonalities persist particularly within the family and this, in turn, impacts on forms of women's agency. In spite of evidence which demonstrates that younger people in rural areas can exercise higher levels of choice and autonomy in the post-Soviet period, for example, in living separately from parents, attaining education and participating in the labour market (Ashwin 2000), for young women the continuing precedence given to marriage and childbirth represents a key barrier to increased personal autonomy. Motherhood, which is often accompanied by marriage, represents a specific set of gendered roles for women, and social norms dictate that motherhood is an indication of female success or

even the achievement of citizenship duties (Lindsey 1997; Temkina & Rotkirch 2002). This focus on women's caring gender role has resulted in men being framed as 'breadwinners' and responsible for providing a working wage for the family. As outlined above, becoming a sole breadwinner is particularly difficult in rural areas where there are few employment opportunities locally and wages are low and research shows that men experience marginalisation as they are not able to fulfil 'their' role adequately. This can also result in difficulties for women who are blamed for failing to make money to meet the families' needs. In rural contexts, there is also less acceptance of men, if unemployed, to take on domestic roles, which are coded as female and not viewed as appropriate for 'real men' (Kiblitskaya 2000; White 2005; Kay 2006).

Although it can be argued that contemporary Russian village life is still characterised by these traditional aspects of the gender order, women often display tensions in their perceptions of the impact this has on their everyday lives; often viewing themselves as neither oppressed nor suppressed, even where the negative aspects of lack of choice, conditions of deprivation or the reproduction of patterns of female experience from generation to generation is acknowledged. Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2007) have discussed such tensions and argued that, despite constraints, there are areas where the redistribution of authority and latent practices inherent in women's ascribed roles can be exercised to create forms of 'women's power'. Here parallels can be drawn with the work of Chodorow (1999) on the importance of the image of 'motherhood' in the socialisation of women as evidence of the mastery of female roles. Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2007) have also shown that women can perceive their sources of control and power derived from their status as mothers and/ or older members of the group or network. However, the legitimacy of these alternative forms of 'power' are uncertain, mobile and frequently represented as breaking rules and they therefore lack legitimacy. As a result, the nature of women's power is located within the family and the intimate emotional relationships which have their own inherent power relations and authority. Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2007, p. 79) argue that women's power 'is individualised, routinised and, consequently, it is difficult to distinguish and as such ''women's power'' is a manifestation of patriarchal relations and may only be exercised within the same system'. While this suggests the limitations placed upon women who might be attempting to create spaces and forms of autonomy within networked relations, the research conducted for this study suggests that it is also possible to argue that women are able to exercise some choice through the ways in which they attempt to rationalise their intimate relationships.

Introducing the empirical data: interviewing young married women in Karsun

The village of Karsun was chosen as it is within the Ul'yanovsk *Oblast'* and it is an example of a rural area experiencing social and economic decline. As Ioffe *et al.* (2006, p. 80) argue, in 1989 Ul'yanovsk was considered the 'geographical gravity centre of Russia's rural population' due to economic and urban transformations that provided good employment and living conditions. However, Ul'yanovsk has fallen behind its more economically successful and developed neighbours, such as Samara and Tatarstan and is currently a subsidised region receiving special funding from the

federal budget.[6] Similarly, the village of Karsun was chosen as the research location as the village is, in many ways, a typical example of the post-Soviet rural experience of severe economic and social decline. While Karsun had been a flourishing area in the 1970s and 1980s because of the availability of employment in collective farms and enterprises and the high level of cultural and leisure activities provided, in the post-Soviet period, Karsun has become an underdeveloped settlement with few employment opportunities and a low standard of living exacerbated by high levels of out migration.[7] Notwithstanding these economic limitations, Karsun was viewed as a regional rural centre by participants because of the vocational colleges based there and because of the greater employment opportunities for women from the smaller surrounding villages. Many young women travel from surrounding villages to study in Karsun or move (often with their parents) to look not only for work, but in some cases to look for a husband, as marriage is also used as a source of social and economic mobility.

Of the 20 young women taking part in this study, 15 had been born in Karsun and five had moved to Karsun from other villages and towns, either with their parents, to study at the local medical college, or as a result of getting married. Half of the women were unemployed at the time of the research, some had recently completed higher or vocational education and were looking for work in the limited sectors available to women, for example, in the hospital, school, kindergarten, in the local clothes factory, in offices, banks or shops. Others were on maternity leave or at home caring for young children. The respondents who were employed worked either in local businesses or as shop assistants, with one respondent working as a nurse in the local hospital and another as a seamstress at the local clothes factory. In all cases, their earnings did not comprise the whole of the family income, but supplemented their husbands' wages. However, the employment opportunities available to men in Karsun were also limited to the petrol station and garage or to the regional government office, although the latter was only open to those with a higher education. As a result, many of the participants' husbands were employed in shift work outside the village, in Ul'yanovsk city, in Moscow, or in the private sawmills in the forests of the surrounding *oblast'*, and returned home only at the weekends. This out-migration of young men for employment purposes led, in turn, to a limitation of opportunities for self-realisation of the young women, especially those who had come to the village to get married and who were mothers, as their career aspirations were sacrificed to childcare responsibilities and the lack of potential opportunities for mobility.

As the interviews and diaries revealed, many of the young women were limited to the space of the home and this in turn necessitated the use of networks for material

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[6]The average salary in Ulyanovsk *Oblast'* in 2008 was R10,600 (approximately $353), which was considerably lower than the average for the country of R17,200 (approximately $573). There is also a gendered impact in terms of unemployment due to lower levels of education where even advertisements for lowly qualified jobs prioritise male applicants. Women account for 52% of the unemployed in the region compared with the national average of 47% (Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe 2007).

[7]In Karsun, the average wage in 2007 was R4,737 (roughly half the average for the city of Ul'yanovsk (R9,277 or $372)) and significantly lower than average wages in Moscow (R23,170 or $937). Moreover, in Karsun some salaries are more likely to be in the region of $70 per month, which is below the subsistence minimum of $136 (Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe 2007).

and emotional support. However, it was difficult for some of the women to maintain their former friendships; indeed, participants who had grown up Karsun were perceived to be in a better position, since they had ample opportunities for communication, emotional support and were acquainted with the local community. The only real frustration for participants raised in Karsun arose due to the high levels of outward mobility of their female friends who had not married but had left Karsun for the neighbouring city of Ul'yanovsk in order to access higher education and who, in most cases, did not return to Karsun. For the women moving to Karsun, these relationships with friends were most often replaced with connections with their husbands' relatives and friends.

'Every parent wants their child to get married': marriage, motherhood and gender norms

In the context of contemporary Russian demographic politics, motherhood is presented as the most respectable and natural role for women (Jackson 2008; White 2005) and getting married and having a family were viewed as the markers of a woman's 'normality' and success. These wider trends combine with the prioritisation of family values and the necessity of finding a 'good' husband over a career, educational and migratory claims in rural contexts (White 2005; Jackson 2008). In addition, early marriage (between 18 and 25 years) is encouraged, particularly in rural areas (White 2005), and almost all my respondents reported that a woman who is not married before the age of 27–28 years in rural areas is considered a 'spinster' and will have few opportunities to marry after this age (Muratova 2002). Unmarried women in their late twenties are also treated with a mixture of disapproval and protection by relatives, neighbours and married girlfriends (Muratova 2002). This hierarchy of values is typical in other societies where 'traditional' gender norms prescribe that having a family should take priority over a woman's career aspirations (Chodorow 1999, p. 37) In this study, similar attitudes were evident, and many respondents referred to the married status of woman in their narratives, using it as an evaluative category to designate women as either 'normal' or 'marginal'. For example, Tatyana passed judgement on a contact saying, 'she has a good job there, but she still doesn't have a boyfriend'. It appears therefore that a rural woman's identity is built on matrimonial status; only if she is married is she one of 'ours'. Tatyana also recounted the hostility displayed towards her from her husband's unmarried sister:

Tatyana: She was married, but she is already divorced and she has no children. Then I gave birth, and that was that—she didn't have children and I did. But we still got on. If we met up with my husband we had a good relationship, that is, a more or less normal relationship. And then just after I gave birth, his mum started to be more involved because of the children, and then she [husband's sister] got involved, not because she was jealous, but simply she wanted to hurt me in some way. Of course I'm no fool and I also tried to address the issue, but of course then there were tears, fights and so on.

Interviewer: So did it actually come to a fight?

Tatyana: Yes one time I almost got into a fight with her.

Interviewer: For what reason?

Tatyana: She said some really bad things about my mum, in front of everyone. Well, I went up and punched her.[8]

While the narrative demonstrated the difficulties that Tatyana faced in this confrontation, it also revealed the judgement she displayed towards her sister-in-law in attempting to reconcile her attitudes towards her. Tatyana mentioned that the sister-in-law was divorced and had no children, which was interpreted as displaying her sister-in-law's failure to fulfil her female 'destiny' in two respects, and it was for this reason, in Tatyana's opinion, that her husband's sister disliked and envied her. This judgement was put forward even more forcibly when Tatyana considered the insulting comments the sister-in-law had made about this respondent's mother.[9]

The young women were also asked to reflect upon why they had decided to get married, what marriage and motherhood meant to them within their overall value systems and expectations and whether it had resulted in any changes to their status and networks. Unplanned pregnancies were discussed by some of the women as the reason for getting married, suggesting that marriage and motherhood were not always part of their overall plans and aspirations, but were entered into as a result of moral pressure from the village community. In this normative climate, however, only motherhood as part of family life is presented as the accepted and appropriate path, particularly in the rural context, which is more conservative and where births outside of marriage are viewed negatively (Kamaev *et al*. 2004). In addition, a lack of sex education and inconsistent moral messages about sexual behaviour often lead to a young woman's first sexual partner becoming her husband due to unplanned pregnancy and moral pressure to marriage (Kamaev *et al*. 2004). Other women, however, such as Katya, aged 22 and eight months pregnant at the time of the interview, described her desire to get married as 'natural', noting that her parents had instilled in her the sense that it was the fate of their children to have families of their own. These views were particularly strongly expressed with regard to female children where parents exercised strong emotional pressures to construct notions of the correct fate for their daughters:

Interviewer: And what was your parents' attitude to you getting married?

Katya: They were really pleased, glad; my dad even cried. Well, of course, every parent wants their child to get married in their life.[10]

This connection between marriage and the expected birth of children was another dominant theme in the narratives. In the case of planned marriages, women emphasised that getting pregnant as soon as possible was imperative. The use of contraception after the wedding was considered to be both unnecessary and undesirable, and the birth of a child during first two years of marriage was considered to be the desired norm.[11] In spite of difficult economic conditions, many young women

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[8]Interview with Tatyana, 25 June 2007, Karsun.
[9]Interview with Tatyana, 17 June 2007, Karsun.
[10]Interview with Katya, 10 June 2007, Karsun.
[11]See also Rouhier-Willoughby (2008) who found similar attitudes in her studies.

have children soon after marriage in accordance with established social norms.[12] Tat'yana, who gave birth to twins, said that although she had not planned to have children so soon, having the twins had made her well known in Karsun. Having a baby not only brought recognition from the village, but as Masha, who was 27 years-old and who had been married for five years and had an 18-month old child explained, it could also improve relationships with in-laws. According to Masha, after the birth of her child, her mother-in-law commented that 'Well, now you have a real family', and began to offer her more support and assistance.

The women also talked about other positive aspects of marriage in how it had changed them, and how for many it represented a rite of passage from girlhood to adult womanhood, through which the bride acquired confidence and assertiveness. These women also felt that this was a result of their exposure to new networks of communication, for example, with their husband's friends. According to the respondents, these new aspects of their personality had emerged from the necessity to successfully participate within the family. In addition, the women felt that they had to be more assertive to protect their new families from negative influences, such as friends who drank or distracted their husband's attention from his family responsibilities. For example, Katya described the changes to her personality:

> *Katya*: It seems to be that everyone says that since I got married I have changed; even his [my husband's] friends have said that. Well, maybe for the good, or for the bad, I don't know, but I feel that he has changed towards me as well. Your personality probably changes because of the obligations of family life that sometimes hamper you. Sometimes you can't be bothered having arguments with someone. Certain friends who want something, you need to sometimes just shut them out because they get on your nerves. Therefore, some would say that my personality has become a little nastier, well maybe more strict.

For the young women in this study therefore, marriage and motherhood enabled them to attain some level of status and respect as it signified a move to adulthood. This new status not only gave women access to support from relatives, but also made women feel more self-confident and assertive in public. Finally, marriage opened up the potential for new friendships with other married women as they became part of the 'women's club'.

Instrumental and emotional communications within women's networks: with whom and for what?

As discussed above, the research data showed that women's communicative circles changed after marriage. The women adopted a strategy of maintaining and mixing old and new social networks and they often employed this strategy to gain access to emotional rather than the economic support. This was shown in their narratives about networks and contacts that tended to be divided into the periods before and after marriage. In the pre-marriage narratives, friends from childhood or acquaintances from college with whom the respondents spent free time featured most, whereas in the post-'marriage' narratives the discussions shifted away from friends towards relatives,

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[12]As is noted by White (2004, p. 109).

including mothers, mothers-in-law and their husbands' other relatives and friends. According to both interviews and diaries, it seemed that, after marriage, women's social networks consisted of three to four female relatives. This shift appears to occur because the structure of respondents' time changed, and leisure practices were given up due to increasing family responsibilities. It also appeared that previously self-selected contacts were replaced by imposed contacts which were linked to discourses about family responsibility.

Yet, in some cases, marriage seemed to have a positive impact on women's social networks and Lena, a 21-year-old who had been married for three years and had a three-year-old daughter told us that she had never had female friends or anyone—apart from her mother—to talk to about personal issues before she got married. The majority of her friends from childhood were boys with whom she usually played football. She referred to them as her 'best friends', and talked about the difficulties she experienced when attempting to communicate with other women:

> *Lena*: I hadn't had female friends; there were friends, three were my best ones, but they were boys. And here I still don't have any female friends. With female friends I find it difficult ... something ... With girls I cannot communicate, it is easier with boys.
>
> *Interviewer*: And why?
>
> *Lena*: Well maybe because of my character, probably; for example—I like to play football. I ran about with boys my whole life. We went hiking, made camps, we even had tree houses. I went to these camps, made camp-fires, baked potatoes ....[13]

On becoming a married woman, however, Lena lost contact with these friends. She said her life now was incompatible with those kinds of close friendships:

> *Interviewer*: And do you maintain any relations with them somehow, with these guys?
>
> *Lena*: Well, yes, I sent them greeting cards at New Year, at birthdays. Sometimes we meet, so we say 'hello', talk, but we are not close anymore. We do not go out, nothing like that.[14]

Lena's experience of losing contact with her former friends was not only because of the pressures of moral norms within the village, that disapprove of personal social contact with men other than relatives, but also due to the changes in available free time for young women, who after marriage spent the majority of time at home or with the family, and not in public spaces where leisure time was previously spent. Thus, the young women in this study tended only to socialise with other men who were the friends or relatives of husbands who came to their house, or who accompanied them on organised family outings to the countryside for barbeques or to fish. It is important to note that similar rules applied to young men in that they did not maintain friendships or socialise with 'outsider' women after marriage. However, men's social networks differed from the young women's as they took place in sites outside the home, for example, when away at work, at the garage, when doing building work or repairs, or on the streets where drinking beer and smoking on benches is acceptable for men. In this

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[13]Interview with Lena, 29 June 2007, Karsun.
[14]Interview with Lena, 29 June 2007, Karsun.

sense, men's social networks were also less subject to the scrutiny of the family and provided greater autonomy and independence, whereas women's socialising was limited to the family circle and was therefore also under constant and close scrutiny.

In addition, living in the village also presented few legitimate public spaces for adult socialising; for example, there were no cafes, cinemas or shopping malls and it was deemed inappropriate for married people to stroll on the streets or in the park as teenagers did. Like Lena, Inna also discussed how her social networks had unravelled once she had married, and had become removed from her familiar communicative environment. The lack of adequate opportunities for communication also resulted in emotional stress for the young women in this study. Only three respondents represented a 'happy exception' in that they had married men from within their existing social circle. This allowed them to maintain previous friendship networks and to extend their social networks due to legitimated acquaintance with their husband's friends. Inna, who was 18-years-old, had been married for six months and was eight months pregnant at the time of research, explained her experience:

> Well, in Inza I had, of course, lots of female friends. We went to discos with our class mates—but now they have all gone to Samara to study and they are staying there and they all work. One friend works in Inza, so she's staying there … Another one comes here quite often and in August I will meet up with her. I see the others less often; in fact I rarely see them. And here I have no female friends! Well, it happens that Sasha has friends, and—well—I see their wives. And, here I don't really have friends, well some people I study with, they are all here from the countryside, or from Karsun, all in a crowd. Well, it's all a bit low-key; no one goes out at all. I have no friends here.[15]

Another example of changes to social networks as a result of motherhood was that the young women now tended only to socialise with similar people—with other married couples, often those who also had children and were within their family circle. Respondents seemed to consciously seek out other women with similar family responsibilities and similar experiences in order to have something in common to talk about. Oksana, a 26-year-old shop assistant who had been married for five years and had a four-year-old daughter said:

> Well, I don't really have close female friends … friends, well ours, are mostly family friends and we often go to visit family. Well, they have also lived together for five or six years. We even had our weddings together. Well, for us we have many such family friends. Everyone has their own home. For example, one of our friends, Misha, also works in the timber factory; Natasha, his wife, looks after my daughter as I'm working at the moment. We get on with them really well. … Another couple, the Alekseevs, Oksana and Misha, they live in Karsun. She works in the hospital, he, well, at the moment he doesn't work, but is training to be an accountant. And we also get on really well with them. My younger sister, well her husband is also really good friends with my husband—they studied together and went to school together and have continued their friendship. They even work together now. They are always together. The majority of the time we are with them: we go to them, they come see us. They live further away, and they have a car, so they come to us mostly.[16]

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[15]Interview with Inna, 6 July 2007, Karsun.
[16]Interview with Oksana, 13 July 2007, Karsun.

In this case, the socialisation between the women was not a result of friendship or emotional closeness, but had developed out of relationships between families and at work. As discussed above, having coinciding interests, in living conditions and in everyday practices, was important. Oksana felt that it was important that her circle of friends were at similar stages in their lives. In Oksana's new circle, the friends shared a lot in common; they not only had their wedding at the same time, they all lived independently of parents, and accordingly were able to visit one another in their free time and when it suited them. Another respondent, however, experienced these new contacts as a set of obligations, and discussed how she felt compelled to make contact with the wives of her husband's friends even when they had little in common other than children. This duty of contact was 'implied' as a result of her status as a married woman and, as such, communication was more likely to take on a routine formula, for example, in discussing housekeeping and daily issues, rather than any personal or emotional concerns. Olga, a 25-year-old who had been married for five years and had a four-year-old son explained:

> They [her husband's friends] phoned to ask us if we wanted to go fishing. I didn't want to go—I don't like fishing and I don't really enjoy their company either. But they are my husband's friends and it would not look good if he went on his own without me. So the men went fishing and did their thing and the women just sat with the children talking about housework. I'm not friends with Anna—I wouldn't tell her anything personal as the next day the whole village would know. So we sat there and talked about children.[17]

Communication with their husbands' relatives was also experienced as an obligation rather than a choice, and the women appeared to take part in these exchanges in order to maintain good relations with relatives, but also when they did not have their own friends to talk to. Despite these challenges and difficulties, the women participating in this study placed a high value on these same everyday contacts, often due to a lack of alternative or external sources of information. Although women had quite a high level of access to television or women's magazines, the young women in this study did not have access to relevant female role models. They chose not to associate themselves with images of successful, beautiful women, which prevail in the media, but rather sought out women who had similar life experiences and whose lives they had some chance of replicating.

As a result, great importance was attached to the influence of the 'close circle' of people with whom the women interacted with day by day, and the transition of female experience to marriage and motherhood and the associated practices and behaviours was rooted in a traditional 'oral' character, where experiences and advice were passed from older to younger women or from more 'experienced' female friends (interpreted in the village context as married women) to less experienced women (unmarried friends or relatives). In spite of these hierarchies, in some cases, close connections developed between the husband's relatives and his wife and although initially enforced, the relationship could evolve into friendship.

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[17]Interview with Olga, 19 July 2007, Karsun.

Sources of emotional support and relations of power within women's networks:
young women's relationships with their mothers and mothers-in-law

Chodorow argues that '[w]omen tend to have closer personal ties with each other than men have, and to spend more time in the company of women than they do with men. In our society, there is some sociological evidence that women's friendships are emotionally richer than men's' (Chodorow 1999, p. 200). As a result, 'women have other resources and a certain distance from their relationships to men . . . . women have a richer, ongoing inner world to fall back on, and . . . the men in their lives do not represent the intensity and exclusivity that women represent to men' (Chodorow 1999, p. 198). While there was evidence that respondents valued the role of their networks in providing this support, it is important to note that hierarchies of power also existed between women, which were built on prior forms of subordination, such as differences in age, experience or the status of the woman in family (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2007). One of the hierarchies discussed by the young women in relation to their social networks was based on age and experience that resulted in young women feeling obligated to their mothers or mothers-in-law. Yet, these hierarchies were not necessarily viewed as negative at all times and almost every participant also discussed their strong affection towards their mother and the crucial role that their mother played in their everyday life.

For the majority of young women, their mother was often the one consistently accessible person within their social circle. Mothers were valued as they were viewed as able to give a richer insight into life experience that their daughters could draw upon to resolve their own everyday problems. Mothers were represented in the narratives as older and wiser companions, always ready to give advice or help with the resolution of difficult or unfamiliar situations of family life. Respondents therefore viewed their mother as the person who influenced their values most and who performed a socialising function through the transmission of traditional family values, which formed the basis of the young women's outlook after marriage and motherhood. Many young women in the study accepted the influence of their mother as they did not want to have to 'reinvent the wheel', and instead agreed to live by defined patterns, despite the sense of restriction, because adhering to these norms guaranteed certain dividends in terms of stability and sense of security from being part of a family or strong network of women.

The majority of respondents also maintained frequent communication with their own mothers in order to gain emotional support. Analysis of diaries showed the intensification and development of contacts between the young women and their mothers after marriage and motherhood. In some cases, a respondent's mother might telephone several time a day, or visit their daughter up to 10 times per day if they also lived in Karsun. Katya confirmed the importance of contact with her mother:

Interviewer: Who do you most often call?

Katya: By phone? Well, my mum, of course. Yes. For any question, for any favour, it's always my mum I go to.

Interviewer: And to your husband?

Katya: Oh! Well, with my husband I can discuss interesting questions. Well, he has his own areas of expertise, and he might be able to answer my question and give some kind of advice, but all the same, all the same, it is better to ask my mum, she has more life experience, so knows more than us.[18]

As the quotation above also shows, trust was an important element in conversations with mothers and the perception was that a mother would always be on her daughter's side, be genuinely glad of her happiness and maintain any secrets and personal conversations in confidence. The young women in this study felt that they could trust their mother, even with issues that they felt unable to discuss with their closest female friends. As Oksana explained, 'here, there is no one with whom I can share any secrets. Well, my one friend—is my mum, I can share a lot with her'.

The levels of affection and trust displayed towards their own mothers also appeared to influence their perception that it was almost impossible for the young women to do anything without their mother's prior approval. For example, only one of the 20 informants had married against her mother's will and she was ostracised as a result. This banishment then had serious psychological consequences and resulted in restricted access to important material resources. In some cases, the authority of the mother was so great that her advice was taken 'as law' and used without question. Mothers were also presented as the most competent figure in marriage preparations and ceremonies. For Katya, her mother's beliefs in the custom that a daughter must get married in her childhood home meant that the groom and his friends had to drive 100 km to her home on the day of the wedding in order to fulfil the wishes of the mother and pay a dowry for the bride.[19] As Katya explained, 'it was because my mum said that it was usual that the bride should be brought from her home—and what mum says, then that's how it will be'.

On the one hand, the role of the mother was regarded as restrictive in some cases, when ensuring 'obedient' daughters take on their new role as 'efficient' wives, for example, by helping them to cook, to shop and to keep house, by offering advice on how to behave appropriately with their husbands and how to resolve problems or settle family conflicts. On the other hand, the young women in this study were also able to use their relationship with the mothers to their own advantage: for example, after the birth of a child, mothers often appeared in the participants' interview narratives as accessible, free nannies who enabled young parents to go to work or to socialise, and often the women had found a job as a result of assistance from their mother, for example, by tapping into her mother's networks and communications. This is illustrated by Oksana's experience:

Interviewer: Who helped out with your daughter when she was small?

Oksana: It was my mum who baby-sat because the other mother [mother-in-law] was ill. ... The majority of the time it was my mum. She was here for almost three years. When my

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[18]Interview with Katya, 10 June 2007, Karsun.

[19]The custom of paying a dowry for a bride has been retained in many cultures in contemporary Russia. Even weddings in towns retain elements of this practice. According to this practice, the groom and his friends must pay a symbolic sum of money or give gifts to the female friends of the bride, and the groom must also resolve some riddles and games that symbolise his readiness and willingness to look after his sweetheart.

daughter was a year and a half, I put her into kindergarten. Probably for about two or three months I didn't work, but then my husband wasn't working either, so I had to look for a job. I went to work, so for example in the winter I couldn't go and pick her up. I work two days, and I collect her from kindergarten one or two nights. But when she was three years old, then it was always my mum [who collected her]. It was always my mum, and even now she calls her mum, because she was always there [at home with grandmother and grandfather].[20]

Nevertheless, there was evidence in the project that the balance of power between mother and daughter shifted with the daughter's age and experience of marriage and motherhood. The oldest of the women participating in the study (those aged between 25 and 27) were able to use their longer experience of marriage and motherhood to justify a lesser need for help and advice (or, in some cases, to refuse interventions) from their mothers on these grounds. These women had greater levels of independence and were able to make decisions without being under the scrutiny of their mothers; in a sense, their independence was legitimised through attainment of the status of established wife and mother. The extent varied to which the power dynamics between mother and daughter shifted but, in some cases, where daughters began to offer material support to parents or, to help them with more physically demanding domestic chores, mothers began to feel dependent on their daughter and lost a form of control as a result.

Mothers-in-law also represented important forms of support for the women who had moved to Karsun from other small villages and whose own mothers were unable to offer them support due to a variety of problems, including illiteracy, low levels of social capital or alcoholism. For these respondents, the mother-in-law often replaced the role of their mother, and some respondents even formed closer relationships with their mothers-in-law than their mothers, referring to their mothers-in-law as their 'local mum' in interviews and diary entries. Such close relations usually developed where the mother-in-law also offered support in terms of childcare, especially where this was viewed as useful and invited, rather than imposed as an unwanted intervention. There were also cases where mothers-in-law took their daughter-in-law's side in intra-family conflicts, and this was interpreted as an especially positive example of support. While there was some evidence in this study that mothers-in-law more often sided with their sons, the data generally showed how mothers-in-law could provide important sources of support, particularly emotional support.

On the whole, respondents displayed loyal attitudes towards their mothers-in-law in accordance with their wish to be 'good brides' but all the women described their relationships with their mother-in-laws as having both good and bad aspects. It was generally felt that a good relationship with their mother-in-law was useful and in order to maintain this, it was necessary to demonstrate a willingness to help, to do household tasks and to demonstrate the abilities of a 'good wife', as illustrated by Katya:

Katya: Well, I don't know, she always had a good attitude towards me, and I liked her even from the first day we met. I helped all round the house, or at the *dacha* or doing the washing, the dishes and I think that's why she got on with me.

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[20]Interview with Oksana, 13 July 2007, Karsun.

Interviewer: Were you already used to each other since before the wedding?

Katya: Yes, yes, she was already used to me and therefore she was not even against the marriage, in fact she was 'for' it.[21]

In some cases, it appeared that mothers-in-law were highly supportive of the women. Tatyana discussed how her own mother generally telephoned to find out how the grandchildren were, whereas her mother-in-law called to check up that her son was behaving appropriately and to mediate in disputes between couples. This intervention resulted from the perception of her husband's inability to fulfil his role as head of household and breadwinner; and if he had been drinking, the mother-in-law usually supported the young woman.

Relationships with women of a similar age: emotional communications with sisters and friends

In addition to the important role played by mothers and mothers-in-law, sisters, and especially older sisters, were frequently named as the closest female friend. Older sisters were portrayed in the women's narratives as people who were able to offer help and guidance in the home through sharing their own experiences of family life, but were also able to provide important emotional support. For example, Tatyana, who was experiencing difficulties in her marriage due to the absence of her husband and was receiving financial support from her mother, was able to confide in her older sister who had experienced similar problems; in fact, their mother was supporting both sisters financially as well as assisting with the housekeeping and childcare. The extracts from Tatyana's diary below illustrate the importance of talking to her sister in dealing with the financial and emotional strain as a result of her marital problems,

> 12:20: My sister called, and was complaining about her husband, he does not help her at all. She must cope with everything (kitchen garden, children, work and all the housework). I felt really sorry for her and I cried. But I cannot help her as I am in practically the same situation too. And mum is torn between helping both of us. Mum does not know who needs help more. Certainly, she helps me more at the moment. But the problem is that she also works, she is 56 years already, but cannot leave work because she helps us financially as well. But that's the way we live.

> Yesterday my dickhead lost his phone, and went out to look for it; he's only just woken up now and is in furious mood (14:30). He's not even gone to work today (I'm ready to kill him).

As the above citation shows, relations between sisters were often close trusting relationships where each held the confidences of the other. However, the above extract also shows the inherent hierarchies within even these close relationships, often played out through other forms of support within the network, most often the role of their mothers. These extracts provide an insight into the distribution of roles within a family: while the role of supporter is often carried out by the mother, in everyday

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[21]Interview with Katya, 10 June 2007, Karsun.

discourse this role is attributed to the husband. This explains why the informant above was so angry about her husband's perceived neglect of his ascribed role.

Although few women had close contacts with women of their own age outside the family networks, for some respondents, relationships with other women at work also formed an important form of practical and emotional support. Women's discussions about relationships with work colleagues illustrated how, over time, work could become a legitimate space for making and maintaining links with friends outside the family. Oksana argued that older female work colleagues were an important resource as they fulfilled a mothering role where the young women felt cared for:

> I work in a food store. The day goes quickly when you work. I really love the social aspect, especially with ordinary people who you can find a common bond with. There are all the grannies that look our for everyone ... they are over every 10 minutes fussing over you, then another always running about asking 'Oksana—how are you', 'Do you need any tablets?' And then there is Valia; she also works there, my workmate, she's my brother's wife, so it's really easy. We have also become good friends with the manager. So work is good, I like it. It's already my second year working there. We already have some kind of group formed. In general, they are all grannies. There aren't many young people, but I really like it.[22]

In addition to forming friendships with neighbours and work colleagues over time, some of the young women also actively created new networks outside of the close circle of family with other young women in the village who had recently given birth. This 'informal club' of young mothers allowed the women to socialise and walk together with their prams in the local park. Although not seen as a form of explicit or strong source of emotional support as was the case with female relatives, such practices were viewed as important for the establishment of local female identity and for meeting new acquaintances; they also enabled the respondents to establish future career and recreational networks.

The absence of men? Young women's narratives about marital relationships

Being married was one of the main experiences in respondents' lives and was therefore one of the most prominent themes in the interviews. However, discussions of marriage focused on the difficult relationships women had with their husbands, either as a result of alcoholism, domestic violence or other financial difficulties. This seemed to reflect discourses around the perceived deficit of 'good men' due to lower numbers of men in rural areas as well as problems of alcohol abuse (Ashvin & Lytkina 2004). Thus, a tension emerged in the data whereby marrying a 'good enough' man was seen as a marker of a woman's self-realisation in the eyes of the local community, while the women's own narratives suggested that in reality, husbands were not 'good enough' and were often absent and failing to provide either material or emotional support. Diary entries provided most insights into how the women in this study viewed the position of their husband in daily life in the village. Here, the husband was not presented as a friend, interlocutor or partner. Rather, the husband was perceived by the majority of informants as an economic and social resource and many respondents

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[22]Interview with Oksana, 13 July 2007, Karsun.

did not describe their husbands as one of their important contacts at all. Husbands were presented as part of a 'habitual' routine element of a day-to-day life who did not participate in the emotional life of the woman.

As a result, the conflict of emotional–romantic and instrumental–role relations in family was evident in most diary entries. The following extract from Tatyana's diary shows how writing a diary was used to express a 'cry from the heart' where she felt it was impossible to be heard or understood by her husband:

> I would really like to share with somebody, but I cannot. If another person knows, the whole village knows. ... My life is so boring, really terrible. Everything has already settled. I wish something new or interesting would happen. But in general nothing is necessary except feeding my babies. Therefore children are happiness. If they were not here then I would not exist as a human being. Thank God that there are mine—my little ones. For me the most important thing in life is the children and my lovely mummy; I just could not live without them. I love them dearly. And the husband (or, as it seems to me, the 'thing') could come and go, neither one, nor the other. But the children and mum—they couldn't be taken away.

However, such disclosure also brought fear and risk as Tatyana admitted that on having read her diary, her husband abused her and threatened to tear the diary into pieces. Such feelings of isolation were especially typical among informants who had married as a result of an unplanned pregnancy. It was especially rare in these cases for the husband to become 'the close person' in the respondents' lives, and relations between couples in these cases mostly took on a functional character, with the husband viewed as the breadwinner, even though he was not necessarily the main or only earner, and as a necessary component for establishing women's status. In terms of men's roles as fathers, in these cases, respondents viewed their husband as a kind of 'sperm donor' rather than an involved parent. Husbands who were absent either physically or emotionally during pregnancy or after the birth of a child were also usually alienated from the majority of both economic and moral decisions relating to family life. In addition to failing to provide emotional support, husbands were also presented in the interviews as inadequate figures. They were a common topic of conversation among mothers, sisters, neighbours and fellow workers. Indeed, respondents viewed any close emotional relationships with husbands as a 'luxury' that was not accessible to everyone. In the space of the home, men were presented as unable to provide any understanding or helpful advice resulting in narratives suggesting that male and female worlds in the village ran in parallel, but separately. Women presented men as 'others', and their relationships with them could not be the same as those held with women as men could not fully appreciate women's experiences.

At the same time, the 'female solidarity' presented in these discussions about husbands among respondents was not only about mutual assistance, but a kind of secret knowledge only shared among women. Thus, women's solidarity was created in the voicing of their opinions and feelings of dissatisfaction towards their husbands with other women. Men were framed as unable to function without the women in their lives, and as 'children' dependent on the women. Women used these discussions to reassert their own sense of control over their daily lives even in the face of ongoing difficulties. Although this only took place within the women's close circles and did not

change their day-to-day experiences with their husbands, talking about their domestic problems did result in women finding paths to resolve them and in some sense to feel they had some form of power that their husbands did not have control over. This was achieved, for example by bringing sarcasm or sharp-witted remarks into their conversations about their husbands—about their lack of ability to earn enough money because they wasted money on themselves; about their running back to their mothers after a disagreement; or their inability to give up drinking. In this way, the women sought to regulate the power relations in the domestic sphere.

Conclusions

This essay has shown how young married women living in rural Russia used personal networks to cope with the difficult living conditions in a rural village as well as the emotional isolation when leaving former personal networks behind after marriage. The young women used networks to access practical advice, economic and emotional support, and to create a sense of power and control over their lives where this was absent from their private lives and relationships with their husbands. In addition, the essay has shown how networks could also be a site for the translation of female experience (of marriage and motherhood) between generations and also among cohorts of women. Marriage and motherhood represented an important element of their gender identity. The continuing resonance of traditional gender roles embedded within current demographic politics in Russia also strengthened perceptions that motherhood remained the key role for women. In the rural context under study in this essay, motherhood was also interlinked to marriage, which represented the means by which young women established legitimate status for themselves in the eyes of the residents of the village.

The everyday communications with other women, particularly relatives and close female friends, represented a 'female' space for the young women, which was viewed as secret and closed to the influence of men, and thus offered an important source of emotional support and a sense of control that was viewed as missing from their marriages. In addition, young women attempted to use their communicative networks to manage some of the other less desirable aspects of marriage, such as a sense of loneliness after being removed from old friendship networks, as well as the obligations of being a 'good wife and mother'. This research has shown that young women also used networks to attempt to manage the hierarchies in the village between women, particularly those arising from age and status. While the young women entered into some communications with older female relatives out of a sense of obligation, for some, over time they became important sources of support and information, sometimes taking on the role of an appreciated mother figure. Thus, exploring the young women's communicative networks shows the complexity of networks in rural Russia; they are not simply a material livelihood strategy, but can develop into complex relations of interdependence and the site of emotional engagements as well as places where women can transfer experience; particularly, once they were perceived by others as gaining their own status as 'experienced' women as a result of becoming wives and mothers. Thus, the essay suggests that two parallel gender orders exist in rural Russia: one which conforms to public discourses about being a good wife and

mother; and another private or hidden set of relations between women where these public discourses are criticised and subverted. Furthermore, it shows that making networks with other women remains an important female livelihood strategy in attaining material support, advice and emotional space to disclose frustrations and challenge power relations between women and men and between women.

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