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**“Being a Woman is Different Here:” Changing  
Attitudes towards Femininity, Sexuality, and  
Gender Roles among Former Soviet Immigrant  
Women in the U.S.**

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## **Introduction**

Since the late 1980s, over 1.7 million former Soviet Jews have emigrated to the West (mainly US, Canada and Germany) and to Israel, forming a thriving global Russian Jewish Diaspora of the post-communist era (Remennick, 2002a). Over half of these immigrants are women, whose experiences of resettlement and social adjustment have largely remained outside the focus in both feminist and migration-related scholarship. Few published books and articles on immigrant women typically examined the lives of Asian, African and other women from developing countries in the West (Buijs, 1993; Simon, 2001). Yet, the experiences of Russian and East European women in the course of their encounter with Western or westernized societies are quite distinct from those of the Third World women, given their different background – especially high educational attainment and universal employment in the former socialist countries. At the same time, immigrant women of any origin may experience a similar set of problems and challenges due to their social marginalization in the host countries.

Russian Jewish immigrant women in Israel have been in the center of my research since the mid-1990s. I've conducted several surveys and multiple qualitative studies that addressed the issues of premarital sexuality, family planning and birth control (Remennick et al., 1995), professional careers of male and female immigrants (Remennick and Shtarkshall, 1997; Remennick, 2002b; Remennick and Shakhar, 2003), chronic diseases and preventive behavior (Remennick, 1999b); utilization of social and medical services (Remennick, 1999b; Gross et al., 2001); attitudes towards abortion and its emotional aftermath (Remennick and Segal, 2001); multiple roles and emotional burnout among middle-aged women (Remennick, 2001), cross-cultural dating among young Russian women (Remennick, 2005), and more. When these facets of immigrant women's lives are collated together, it becomes obvious that beside the problems of physical and psychosocial adjustment in the new country, common to both genders, women face an additional set of constraints evolving from cultural and normative differences in gender roles, especially in sexuality, fertility and family life, which are usually viewed as the essence of femininity. In Russia, Israel and in most other cultures, sexual and reproductive issues are also perceived as moral, which puts female immigrants (usually seen as different if not deviant) in public spotlight and often inspires critical discourse in the media and other vessels of public

opinion. When minority women form a large and visible group, they often become the target of sexist attitudes and attacks. Their very presence triggers the outburst of patriarchal sentiments, normally repressed and hidden in the mainstream politically correct discourse. Opinions that would not be tolerated if expressed towards the majority women in the host society may be openly voiced regarding immigrant women. Feeling observed and criticized, former Soviet women often feel the need to redefine their identity as professionals (e.g. being unable to regain their careers as engineers, doctors and in other male-dominated occupations), as well as redress their sexuality and reproductive conduct (e.g., to use the pills and not abortions for birth control) in the new normative context (Remennick, 1999).

My interest in former Soviet women as immigrants informed a comparative study of these issues in the US. Women comprise over 50% of some 500,000 Jews who entered the US as refugees after 1987. Along with some 250,000 of former Soviet Jewish refugees of the 1970s, and an estimated 150,000 of different non-refugee entrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) - job visa holders, green card lottery winners, and others - the total number of Russian speakers in the US exceeds 900,000 (American Jewish Yearbook, 2003). In relative terms, former Soviets comprise a much smaller immigrant group in the US than in Israel, and therefore cause much less media attention and little interest from American social researchers, vis-à-vis other major immigrant populations (e.g., Chinese and Mexicans). Yet, this wave of newcomers is rather unusual in terms of the high concentration of human capital in its ranks, with well over half among men and women alike having postsecondary education and professional experience in the FSU. The predominance of highly skilled among these immigrants coming from a non-western economy poses the problems of occupational re-adjustment, as skills incompatibility is usually aggravated by the limited English proficiency among most Russian-speaking migrants. Another aspect of the integration experiences of Russian Jews generally and women specifically reflects their relations with the established American Jewish community that partly sponsored their immigration and resettlement. The ultimate goal of this comparative study is to follow the transformation of the former Soviet identity generally and notions of femininity specifically in the different socioeconomic and cultural contexts of Israel, US, Canada, and Germany – the main countries of immigration of former Soviet Jews. I will try to understand different venues of psychosocial change ensuing from the resettlement of individuals belonging

to the same culture of origin (Russian/Soviet) to various destinations in the west. The findings of this multi-focal research project will be reflected in a book about Russian Jews on three continents, of which a significant chunk will be devoted to women's experiences of immigration.

## **Research Goals and Methodology**

The **objective of my current research** is to understand how did the dominant (and permanently contested) American notions of femininity, on one hand, and the exposure to the western feminist ideas and practices, on the other, have influenced the attitudes and lifestyles of former Soviet women in the family, intimate relationships, and in the workplace. My approach to this study is *feminist* (i.e. taking as my point of departure the voices and interests of the women participating in the study) and *ethnographic*, i.e. drawing on observations and interaction with my informants in various natural contexts, supplemented by a number of more formal in-depth interviews. Relying on the *qualitative-interpretative sociological paradigm* means that I will not set my theoretical framework in advance but rather build on the insights and explanations arising from my fieldwork, i.e. interviews, observations, and the analysis of texts and other cultural products. Using these *unobtrusive methods of social inquiry* (that I believe to be epistemologically superior to studies using structured tools in formalized settings), I will explore the lives of Russian immigrant women who moved from the FSU to the US since the late 1980s.

There is no such a thing as a monolith Russian Jewish community in America, but rather a series of local communities in specific cities that broadly vary in their size and socio-economic profile. Greater Boston hosts the third largest Russian-Jewish community in the US (after Metropolitan New York and Los Angeles) in terms of size (around 70,000) and is perhaps a number one in terms of human capital. Three quarters of Bostonian Russian Jews come from Moscow and St. Petersburg and about 70% have postsecondary education, among them about 40% hold graduate degrees (Orleck, 2001:135). Women are as educated as men, but their occupational accommodation is usually more difficult due to work/family conflict and a less favorable occupational profile, compared to men. Massachusetts is a popular destination for many Russian Jewish professionals due to its high concentration of

universities, high-tech and biotechnology companies, and medical facilities. Reflecting their occupational success, Bostonian Russians have soon joined American middle-class lifestyle; many of them moved out of the old city neighborhoods to suburban houses in Newton and other surrounding towns. My access to the Russian-speaking immigrant women is made possible by my own ethnic and cultural origins in the same community and having a number of personal contacts in the Russian Jewish circles of greater Boston. These initial contacts led me to other members of the Russian speaking community via so-called consecutive referral or snowballing. I also contacted local Jewish organizations and community service providers who both shared their own experiences of working with Russian Jewish clients and suggested some useful leads to continuing my fieldwork.

My empirical observations pertain to the three main arenas of women's lives - individual, family, and workplace or community. I accompanied these women while they tended to their daily routines such as shopping and taking children to various after-school activities; joined them at parties and family celebrations; I observed the ways these women interact with their children, husbands and parents; participate in communal and cultural events. I also conducted twenty two in-depth interviews in Russian with former Soviet women (mostly Jewish or married to Jews) that focused on the ways immigration to America changed these women's lives. Interviews were semi-structured and usually opened with the general question, such as *"How has your life as a woman changed after immigration to America?"* or *"What are the differences between former Soviet and American women of similar social class?"* or *"Do you think that your Russian/Soviet experiences make your more fit for the adjustment in America or are they counter-productive? In what ways?"* After the initial flow of free expression, I carefully stirred my informants towards the specific issues that interested me, or asked for clarifications and details. The interviews lasted from one and a half to three hours and most were tape recorded upon informants' permission. In a few cases when women felt uncomfortable about recording, I took brief notes and documented my impressions right after the interview.

My informants were in the age range 27 to 56, with the mean age of 41. All of them came to the US after 1987 (the majority between 1988 and 1995), usually as refugees or under family reunification clauses of the immigration law. All these women came to the US from the major Soviet cities – Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev and Minsk. All had academic degrees in different scientific disciplines, humanities or

teaching and had worked full time before emigration. Three women came to the US following their husbands who received exchange visas as postdoctoral or research fellows, and subsequently stayed on shifting from temporary to permanent residency. The average tenure in the US was around 12 years; most women have lived all these years in Greater Boston, but four of them had moved here from New York or Chicago, usually for work-related reasons. Out of twenty women, fifteen were married or cohabiting with a male partner and seven were divorced or single (including two lesbians). All but the latter two women had children; among those having adult unmarried children, about one third lived with them in the same household. All but four women were employed, mostly full time, some as free lancers (e.g., in journalism and translation). Out of those unemployed, three were looking for work and one was a stay-home mother of two small children.

Among other informants, I have interviewed four Russian women married to American men, exploring the cross-cultural encounter between different gender norms and the modes of their reconciliation in these mixed families. I have also interviewed two young Russian lesbian women, discussing their identity, participation in the community life, and prospects for motherhood. As part of my field work I also examined Russian *immigrant press*, read fiction written by recent Russian Jewish female immigrants, and explored other cultural phenomena reflective of the old and new ideas about gender, femininity and masculinity. At the same time, I tried to follow cultural representations of Russian immigrants in the *mainstream American media*.

Below I report and discuss some of my findings, arranged by the principal themes that surfaced in women's narratives and illustrated by typical interview quotes. The names of my informants have been changed for ethical reasons, but other personal details (age, occupation, duration of life in the US) have been kept intact.

## **Findings**

### ***Between Work and Family Roles***

As was mentioned, all my informants had been educated and employed full-time in professional or white-collar occupations in the FSU. For most of them, their profession was a significant part of their personal identity and they wished for career

continuity in the US. At the same time, most were aware of the difficulty and perhaps impossibility of continuing their working lives in America in exactly the same professional capacity. In fact, only five out of twenty two women followed in the same career track in the US (all five were research scientists), while seventeen made dramatic changes or at least some adjustments in their occupational lives. Most women I spoke with never considered quitting their employment altogether and becoming homemakers, for both economic reasons and the need for self-actualization. In the words of Anna (48, former engineer, 12 years in the US), *“I cannot imagine myself secluded in the four walls of my house and I don’t know of anyone else, at least in my close social circle, who dreamed of becoming a ‘lady of the house’, even if their husband could earn a family wage. You need to be a somebody, to find outlets for your talents and energy. And besides that, how would you ever learn English and American customs if you stay at home? I think for fresh immigrants workplace is especially important as a road into the new society.”* Tania (50, former physician, 10 years in the US, works as medical social worker) said along similar lines: *“Our generation of Soviet women was raised by working parents and everybody we knew got higher education and worked in some professional field. Maybe younger women who grew up in post-Soviet Russia are looking for a rich husband who would provide for them, but we have always counted on ourselves.”*

Women’s decision about their working future in the US depended on their age, English proficiency, former occupation and experience, earning potential of their male partner (if any), number of dependents, and multiple other factors. Many younger women had a period of ambivalence and doubts about whether to try and regain their former occupation in the new context or retrain and start a new career from scratch. Their decisions were often informed by the extent of commitment to their former occupation, which quite often had been chosen for these women by their parents or reflected multiple barriers in career choice for Soviet Jews. Specifically, many Soviet Jewish youths of either gender, like their parents, had been stirred into various technology and industry related occupations as these were abundant in Soviet economy and relatively more open to the Jews, promising stable income and upward occupational mobility. In the FSU, the choice of occupation was usually once and for all and few people could risk losing their workplace and livelihood and venture into a new occupational track. In America, greater flexibility and lower ageism were a

pleasant discovery for these women. For example, Anna (45, 12 years in the US) recounted:

In fact I never wanted to be a civil engineer and design roads and bridges. My parents were both engineers and they had decided that this would be the most safe and pragmatic choice for me as a Jewish woman. I never enjoyed my years of study, and then work was a daily drudgery...I've always wanted to deal with people, to counsel, to help... So for me the ability to shed a technical occupation and try something else was a relief rather than a loss. I was 36 when we came here, in the Soviet terms I was almost half-way to my retirement age, but in America mid-thirties is not considered old, you can go to school again in this age. So I signed for youth worker classes at community college and also took courses in social work... In brief, I became youth counselor for disadvantaged and immigrant youth. It's not an easy job, but I enjoy it and know that I really make a difference in these kids' lives...

For Anna, and other women who could not or did not wish to find work as engineers, community work and human services became a viable and attractive alternative. Several informants who arrived in the US relatively young, had studied for a degree or certificate in social work, school counseling, youth programs, social geriatrics, home care, and other helping occupations. Although human services jobs are usually in a low pay range, most women who had made this choice were satisfied with their work lives, stressing the interpersonal skills and multicultural competence it requires as well as flexible work schedule, allowing for family roles. Galina, 49, a senior geriatric worker for a major day care center in Boston, said:

I have truly found myself in my second career here. Although I work with the elderly, including my own co-ethnics (who are not always easy to deal with!), I find a lot of satisfaction in what I do. In Russia old folks were treated as a society's burden if not human waste, but here the attitude is so different... Everybody has a right to spend their last years in comfort and receive all possible support from society, even if they are not rich... I hear so many incredible life stories from the Jewish elders – they had been through so much during the XX century...I always try to invent some new forms of activity to spark their interest, to help them enjoy living...

Some women made occupational adjustments within their old specialty: engineers, mathematicians and physicists retrained into programmers and other information technology (IT) specialists; two MDs and one pharmacist became biomedical researchers; three teachers shifted to special education or student counseling. Three musicians and two artists opened private art classes catering mostly (but not solely) for Russian immigrant children. Five informants out of twenty two

(who arrived in their late 40s) decided not to look for a professional occupation at all and found work in several Russian businesses in Boston area (two worked in grocery stores, two in a realty agency, and one in a Russian printing shop producing a weekly newspaper).

Whatever they used to do in their old lives and whatever new jobs they were having in America, most women were satisfied with their occupational lives and emphasized their positive aspects. Women who worked in high technology or research stressed the intellectual challenge, good pay, and interesting circle of colleagues. Women who worked in human services spoke about their helping ethos and making a difference in the lives of their clients. Women working in sales and other unskilled occupations said they were glad to be employed and meet their co-workers and clients every day, while so many other women (especially older ones) could find no jobs at all and had to live on welfare. It seems that after several years of trial and error most immigrant women have managed to reinvent their professional identity and find meaning in their new work roles. Although most married women had a lower income than their husbands, this gap was usually perceived by them as 'natural' as it was in line with both their former Soviet experiences and current US reality of gendered occupational and income niches.

As for the work-family divide, juggling multiple roles was a usual situation for most former Soviet women, and this did not change in the US. Nine women had school-age children, and in most cases had to shoulder the responsibility for childcare as their husbands typically worked longer hours. Different women found different solutions, depending on availability of help from their own parents, their work schedules and financial resources. If grandparents were living far or unwell and could not pick up children from school, feed them and take to various after-school activities, most families hired paid help, usually from the ranks of their co-ethnics. Yet, most mothers of smaller children chose part-time or time-flexible jobs allowing them to have free afternoons and evenings. Only one woman in my group, Julia (36), a wife of a well-established MIT Professor and a mother of two young children, decided to leave her own graduate studies for the time being and become a full time home maker. She explained this choice by her personal priorities and the wish to raise her children herself rather than rely on hired nannies. Like many children growing in Russian Jewish immigrant families, Julia's son and daughter attend a large number of extracurricular learning activities (music and art classes, Russian language teacher,

gymnasium, etc.), and chauffeuring them to all different locations is very time consuming. On top of that, Julia is often tending to her unhealthy mother in law living in a neighboring town. *“Altogether, these tasks amount to a full time job and perhaps even some overtime... I definitely prefer knowing that all my loved ones are taken care of and the family is running as smoothly as possible to getting my Ph.D. First things first.”* Julia also added that she has never especially liked her original area of research (physics of the metals) and when and if she goes back to graduate school or labor market she would probably opt for an altogether different occupation. She has several intellectual hobbies (writing and illustrating children’s books, teaching Russian to immigrant children) that help her retain her identity as an educated and thinking person. Another woman in her mid 40s left her prior teaching career in art history for the sake of her nine year-old son who is a musical prodigy and a home schooling student. She continues to work on her scholarly publications and supplements the family income giving piano lessons to the neighborhood children. Both women who decided to become full time mothers underscored the importance of continuing some intellectual activities in order *“not to get their brains rusty”* and to preserve a positive self-image as intelligent and creative persons.

Thus, the solutions to work-family conflict among Russian immigrants were basically similar to those found by most working women in the US, but with the greater cultural emphasis on intergenerational solidarity and hands-on help. Few women who could afford it opted for quitting their careers for good, or at least took an indefinite time off, for the sake of giving hands-on care to their children and elders. Regardless of their current employment type and content, virtually all women in my study emphasized their need for self-actualization, either in the context of paid work or unpaid creative or social activities they pursued. Women who were compelled by the American labor market situation to switch from a more prestigious and professional occupation they had in the FSU to a less ambitious one (e.g. from engineering or medicine to social work or geriatric care) usually appreciated their new work roles and emphasized the ethical meaning of their new work in human services. None of the women I spoke with regretted the loss of their earlier social and professional status – in stark contrast to the men in this immigrant population (of whom I learned indirectly from the women’s narratives).

### *The Family Sandwich: Relations with Parents and Children*

Most Soviet immigrants of the late 1980s and 1990s resettled in the US as entire families, bringing an unusually high percentage of the elderly compared to other immigrant groups (about 40% being over age 60). At the same time, Soviet Jews have had low fertility, with the average family having about 1.4 children. Thus, a typical three-generational family coming to the US included a couple with one or two children and their own elderly parents. Initially these families settled together, usually in old immigrant neighborhoods of Greater Boston, such as Brighton, Allston and Lynn, in order to pool together scant resources and mutual aid. However, as soon as adults found well-paying jobs they often preferred to move from these immigrant enclaves to middle-class suburban towns, while the elders often remained in their Brighton apartments or moved into communal projects for the elderly where they had a better chance for social life and available geriatric services. Some immigrant families moved to the suburban homes all together, which on one hand preserved a natural family safety net but on the other resulted in greater social isolation of the elders and their dependency on the children for everyday help and transportation. Regardless of the type of residence (separately or together with the elders), women of the middle generation are the main providers of both instrumental and emotional support to their parents and in-laws (Remennick, 1999).

In my small group of informants, two-thirds of the women had one or both parents living with them or nearby, some others had in-laws or other elderly relatives to take care of. Vera (38, art teacher) told about her mother (aged 66 and living with her own 87 year old mother in a rented flat in Allston):

My mum and grandma try their best to live independently, but it is hard for them to get around without English. My mum has mastered some minimal number of words and phrases to explain herself but she usually cannot understand people's answers, and my grandma has no English at all. So I have to help them with the doctors, banks, social services, shopping – virtually everything that includes contact with the outside world. Often I have to drive them to different places in the afternoon or evening, so I get back home really late. My kids (ages 15 and 12) are not so little anymore, but they still need their mom, especially as they don't drive yet. So I am pretty torn between the old and the young ones – I am the family's caregiver and chauffeur.

While in the early years of resettlement the parents are a source of support and hands-on help with small children, over time the balance of aid reverses and aging

parents become consumers rather than providers of care. Daughters and daughters-in-law also feel responsible for the emotional support of the elders who are often overwhelmed by the sense of loss of their past and the lack of meaningful place in the new society. Another cause of loneliness for the elders is gradual attrition of the bonds with their Americanized grandchildren (whom they often cared for in their younger years). As their cultural expectations are those of authority over their children and grandchildren, active participation in family decision making and being providers rather than consumers of support, the process of marginalization and dependency is highly traumatic for many Russian Jewish elders. In this respect, the stories told by my informants about their parents and intergenerational dynamics confirmed earlier observations in the Russian Jewish communities across US made by Annelise Orleck, (2001:150).

Many informants in my study spoke about the need to redefine their own mothering attitudes and practices in America. Russian Jewish parenting culture is very much about controlling children, setting the goals and limits for them, and generally intense involvement in their lives till adulthood and often beyond; the American parental license and alleged 'carelessness' is perceived by Russian parents as irresponsible and dangerous. They are quite torn between the old and new social norms regarding parent-child relations and the extent of freedom given to the offspring. Mothers (and fathers too) were deeply concerned about low educational standards in most US schools and made multiple sacrifices in order to place their child in a better school, public or private. They also made special efforts to fill children's free time with meaningful and educational activities, taking them to various after school art, sports, math, chess, and other classes and groups. Many parents were scared by the risks of the 'street Americanization' of their children and their joining the urban culture of 'sex, drugs and hard rock' that valorizes 'fun' and 'having a good time' instead of hard work and achievement. In the words of one mother, "*what came naturally in St Petersburg became a constant effort and swimming against the stream in America.*" So when and if the children did not adopt their parents' values about education, self-development and achievement, it was a severe disappointment questioning their whole effort invested in migration. During college years, many parents tried to stir their children to the familiar occupational track of science and technology, regardless of the children's interests and wishes, because of the future possibilities on the labor market. When children resisted parental pragmatism and

made their own ‘non-practical’ educational choices (e.g., opting for the liberal arts), many mothers were frustrated and felt that they failed as parents.

Another source of tension has to do with children’s sexual conduct. Like their US-born peers, Russian Jewish adolescents start dating and relationships with the opposite sex rather early by the Russian standards, and without any clear marital intentions. For many former Soviet parents it is difficult to accept the detachment of sexuality from marriage as in their own youth they often married their first serious date, and this usually happened in their early 20s (especially among the girls). Middle class American youths often start active sexual lives long before they intend to start a family, trying to avoid pregnancy by means of effective contraception. Russian mothers still expect their daughters to find a right man and marry young (after getting their undergraduate degree is an often cited deadline), and they are ready to help them with future childcare like their parents used to help them. Yet, in many cases their daughters and sons follow a different scenario, dating and cohabiting with their partners and not thinking of marriage and children any time soon. Many informants believed that if not married by their mid twenties, their daughters will stay single for life. *“If you don’t marry young all the good men are taken and you have no partners to choose from”, “Men look for younger women, and after thirty you chances dwindle”* – these and similar opinions were often reiterated by my informants. Young men’s marital prospects were of lesser concern for their mothers, although some disapproved of their son’s lifestyle either because they changed girlfriends too often or, on the contrary, never went out and had few female contacts. In any case, the need to have a stable partner and a family life was seen as universal human need and a sign of maturity by most of my informants. They saw themselves as responsible for their children’s happiness and could not let go of the habit to shape and influence their lives, at the same time feeling that they do not have this power anymore.

### ***Sisters or Strangers: Relations with American Jewish women***

As most former Soviet immigrants entered the US on the “Jewish ticket,” they had to define their place vis-à-vis the established Jewish community, especially in view of significant assistance they received from the American Jewish organizations at all stages of their resettlement process. Women often had a greater personal stake in these relations than their male partners for several reasons. First, due to matrilineal

principles of Judaism women are in the focus as they are the backbone of the family and they define whether their children will be Jews by birth and by education. Second, women often served as social agents for their families during resettlement and were more in touch with the Jewish organizations that assisted them in housing, the study of English, employment, child education, eldercare, arranging for immigration of a family member, etc. Men were typically more focused on finding jobs and making an income, while women took care of everything else, making a broader range of contacts in the new society. Most former Soviet Jewish women (like their male counterparts) were secular and had very limited prior familiarity with Judaism, or none at all. Some experienced the remnants of the Jewish tradition in their families via Seder dinners, Jewish cuisine, grandparents speaking Yiddish, rare (and dangerous due to the KGB surveillance) visits to the synagogue on Simhat Tora; many others grew up without even that, as regular soviet youths. Many women came of mixed marriages between Jews and non-Jews, or were in a mixed marriage themselves. Partly Jewish or non-Jewish wives of Jews felt that they did not belong to the Jewish world and could not connect with the receiving society on the Jewish grounds. Moreover, many women of Jewish origin but of secular orientation were uninterested in religious life and Jewish customs and also felt estranged from their mainstream co-ethnics in the US.

Most women followed one of the two possible scenarios in relation to their Judaism: adoption or distancing. The first group, albeit remaining secular, chose to get closer to the mainstream ‘cultural Judaism’ usually via getting their offspring familiar with the Jewish history, language and religion. They sent their children to Jewish schools, summer camps, and trips to Israel; celebrated their bar- and bat-mitzvahs; teamed up with American Jewish parents in various extracurricular activities, thus getting socially accepted into the Jewish circle. Some others also adopted elements of the Jewish lifestyle in their own practice (e.g., celebrating Jewish holidays, making donations for Jewish and Israeli causes, making trips to Israel, lighting candles on Shabat, not eating pork, trying to keep kosher). The other group, on the contrary, chose to distance themselves from any Jewish activities, refrained from giving any Jewish education to their children and generally preserved their neutral non-sectarian stance, trying to join the mainstream US middle class.

Women whom I observed and interviewed belonged to both categories, but most Jewish women have drifted over time towards adopting some Jewish traits,

reflecting their wish to belong to some defined community in the large and plural American society. For most of these women, their acquaintance with Judaism occurred by means of American Jewish women they met via work, study, or contact with the Jewish resettlement agencies and activist groups. *“I was very impressed by my case worker in the Jewish Family and Children’s Services, and I guess deep inside I wanted to be like her – amicable, confident, connected with others in her community. She advised me about the Jewish history and religion group studying together at one of the centers, I went once just out of curiosity and stayed on. I am not always interested in the contents of each class but I like the atmosphere. About half of the women are truly religious, others are secular but interested, just like me. Religious Jewish women strike me as having integrity and a strong sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. I am afraid I cannot find faith and become observant at this time of my life, but I would like to enjoy at least some light that this tradition casts around us.”* (Rita, 43, former and current engineer). For many others, like Rita, the goals of joining Jewish activities were mainly social. Nina (47, a music teacher) told about her experiences with the mixed group of Jewish women who took part in the initiative to celebrate Passover Seders together in order to cross cultural barriers and get to know each other better. *“I think for a fresh immigrant it is good to join some existing circle, to belong somewhere. This is how you can make new friends, improve your English, have an interesting pastime... and also get back to your own historic roots. I found several good female friends in the group that organized Russian-American Seders – it was fun to plan for this event, to cook, to get dressed... and then the evening itself was so merry. I learned a lot about Jewish history – better late than never... Since then I kept reading books about Judaism, even went for a Hebrew class a few times (laughs). I am still in touch with several American and Russian women from these Seder parties – they taught me how to be Jewish in America without becoming Orthodox...”*

Some other Jewish women – a minority in my experience – did not see any added value in becoming more Jewish in America than they were in Russia. Their primary community of reference was usually other Russian immigrants; in some other cases they were well integrated in the American middle class via their workplace and did not need Judaism as a source of identity. *“I don’t understand this mimicry of many Russian Jews here. All of a sudden they become ‘real Jews,’ recover their’ true self’, change their life habits in order to conform to these strange rules and rituals... If you*

*did not grow up with Jewish religion and tradition it's very hard to adopt it sincerely as an adult. I don't believe them – it's all a facade they put on in order to pass as good Jews among Americans. You know, in this country you must have 'an identity,' to be someone, of some group, of some faith. For me, my faith is my profession, it is enough for my self-identity to be a scientist, to do important research that can affect human lives in the future. On top of that, I am also a woman and a mother – isn't it just enough?"* (Olga, 42, biomedical researcher). Some others stressed incompatibility of Jewish faith with modernity: *"For me, Jewish customs belong to the Middle Ages, or at least to the Shtetl culture that my grandparents left in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to join the urban professional class. It would be weird if I would get back to these rituals at the dawn of the 21 century – what do I need this for? I will not play these games even if it makes me accepted by the local Jews".* (Vera, 50, artist and arts teacher). *"We came to America as Jews because we suffered from antisemitism, and we will remain Jewish in any country. But being a Jew means different things for different people; for me it is much beyond religion: it is the way you raise your children, relate to your husband, do your work... I am Jewish in my own way and nobody will tell me how to be the right kind of Jew"* (Clara, 39, mortgage broker).

Thus, immigrant women chose different locations on the scale between full secularism and Jewish religious observance, but most who developed interest in Judaism subscribed to its moderate 'cultural' version. For those who chose to live more Jewish lives than before emigration, the change was often triggered by encounters with American Jewish women who set an attractive example of a more spiritual and meaningful living. In most cases, though, motivations for joining American Jewish mainstream reflected women's search for social inclusion and belonging to a significant and influential co-ethnic community. Yet for others it reflected social conformism and the wish to meet the expectations of the hosts and sponsors of their immigration. Whatever the underlying cause, the result was the increasing participation of Russian immigrant women in the informal Jewish social networks, often more prominent than that on the male side of Russian immigration.

### ***Marriage, Sexuality, and Family Planning***

As a foreword to this theme, I should note a clear difference in the socio-cultural context shaping immigrant women's femininity and sexuality in the US

versus Israel. From the early 1990s on, women with a Russian accent in Israel were surrounded by a cloud of negative sexual stereotypes that stuck to them due to several interlinked events of that time. The major reason for this reputation was an influx of Russian-speaking sex workers to Israel in the years of mass *Aliyah* of former Soviet Jews. The Israeli male 'street' as well as the mainstream Hebrew media usually could not distinguish between different ethnic and social categories of women with a Russian accent and attributed sexual license to all of them alike. On the other hand, marginalization of some young female immigrants and the perceived lack of other options made them comply with the sexual advances of Israeli men they were dependent on for work, housing, and social orientation. Reflecting a relatively sexist and uncensored by political correctness culture of native Israeli men (especially their Sephardic part), popular Israeli discourse of the 1990s was imbued with the stories of 'seductive and accessible Russian blonds'. These attitudes and innuendoes colored immigrant host-relations in the sexual realm, poisoning the air around all immigrant women regardless of their sexual lifestyles (Remennick, 1999a; Lemish, 2000). Nothing of this has happened with Russian-speaking immigrant women in the US and Canada, because Russian prostitution has never reached American shores on the mass scale and hence never affected popular discourse on Russian women. At the same time, legal and cultural restraints on blatant expressions of sexual interest in the contexts of male power and female dependency, in the form of sexual harassment laws, made sheer pursuit of immigrant women by local men indecent and impossible. The third reason for this difference was that, compared with Soviet immigrants to the US who typically resettled as full nuclear families, many women arrived in Israel alone or with children, with the ensuing economic vulnerability and the need to find a new male partner for support and security.

In my interviews, few women made detailed comments about sexual issues as these are still highly charged and difficult to verbalize in the Russian culture. Yet, some topics have emerged indirectly, especially in the narratives by younger women who were in their sexual formative years, i.e. alone and/or dating, engaged in a relationship, or recently married and starting a family. Most were with male partners of the same ethnic origin, i.e. former Soviet Jews; a few young women were dating Americans, Jewish or not. None of the women spoke of any kind of perceived negative attitudes they experienced from American men; on the contrary, Americans were described as nice, polite, polished... but distant. Some women mentioned having

short-term relationships with their American fellow students and other men, but few women were ready to start a family with an American partner. The main stated reasons against this option revolved around perceived cultural differences in the very concept of family life, relationships, and intimacy, especially in terms of making a firm commitment to marriage. These young women often voiced opinions suggesting strong influence of their mothers' values and attitudes regarding early marriage and the choice of the right partner.

Thus, when asked to explain their strong co-ethnic preference in partner choice, several women said that, apart from cultural similarity and common first language, Russian Jewish men shared with them similar ideas about relationships and marriage. *"I do not understand what the point is in prolonged dating or being in a relationship that doesn't end in marriage. If you cannot make up your mind about this man, then he is probably not right for you and you shouldn't waste your time. Most young men of Soviet origin I know also wish to marry relatively young because they believe in the importance of having your own family and they are not afraid of making the famous 'commitment'... they just don't have this issue like most American men do."* (Marina, 25, a married graduate student). *"I think Russians, men and women alike, have a more realistic attitude towards relationships and as soon as they found a partner they like they don't wish to delay marriage, because everyone wants to get married eventually. I think young Russians assess prospective partners in a more pragmatic way too, i.e. what is their education, occupation, job prospects, income, parental family – all these things are at least as important as love"* (Tina, 28, a programmer and married mother of two sons, ages 5 and 3). Most young women did not see their family and work roles as conflicting and believed that succeeding in both is possible when you can mobilize all possible help, either from older relatives or hired nannies and domestics. They asserted that investing first in education and career and then starting a family in your late 30s (the way many middle class Americans do) was a wrong strategy for a woman, reducing her chances for finding a right partner and having children. *"I know a few American colleagues of mine who were on several boyfriends one after another, and ended up alone while approaching 40. Even if they have a man in their life, they cannot get pregnant anymore, or have problems with their pregnancies. Yes, they have achieved some status in their profession, but I am sure deep inside they are unhappy. A lonely woman in her 40s is a miserable*

*sight...Like your work career, it is important to start your career as a woman early if you wish to succeed” (Inga, 27, graphic designer).*

At the same time, all these women took for granted a premarital sexual experience in both men and women and underscored the need to know your partner also intimately before embarking on a marital relationship. Although premarital sex was abundant in the FSU it was never legitimized, admitted or discussed in the open, so this change of attitude among young Russian women in America was quite remarkable, and similar to that among Russian immigrants in Israel (Remennick et al., 1995). As for the means of birth control, all my informants advocated the use of contraception and perceived abortion only as the last resort. Most young women were aware of the on-going political and moral controversy around abortion in the US and believed that all effort should be made to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. Yet, at the same time all of them believed in the basic woman’s right to decide if she wanted to carry or terminate the pregnancy at least during the first trimester; no one questioned the need to keep all abortions legal, including late ones in special circumstances. *“We come from the country where access to abortion is perhaps all too easy, discouraging both women and men from being careful and using contraception. But you cannot rule out the chance for failure of birth control, so abortion should be there as your back-up. I can’t imagine how in a democratic country the legal system can pressure a woman to carry pregnancy and give birth to a child she doesn’t want to raise” (Dina, 36, accountant, a divorced mother of two). “In sexual matters not everything depends on a woman, she often has no control over her body, especially among the poor and minority groups in this country. Women often get pregnant against their will and you cannot punish them further by denying the right to abortion” (Lena, 32, single, medical researcher).* Thus, all my informants were convinced proponents of a woman’s choice in sexual and pregnancy-related matters.

At the same time, these women’s personal practices in the matters of birth control still reflected their lingering discomfort about sexuality and difficulty of negotiating sexual practices with their partners. Over half of my informants experienced unwanted pregnancies while in the US, mostly due to their reticence in broaching contraceptive use with the men. Irena (39, primary school teacher) commented on that: *“We still suffer from our Russian schooling as ‘nice girls’ who cannot demand condom use for a guy, or explain him about unsafe days for sex. Folk wisdom tells you that if you are too demanding he can always find a more easy-going*

woman... As most women try to keep a man they like, they often have to take risks and sometimes pay the price for pleasing the man. With your husband you can be more assertive, of course, but go find a husband first..." Many women were reluctant to take oral contraceptives, which they considered more dangerous than abortion – an outlook not untypical for many Soviet gynecologists and older women they had influenced. Zhanna (38, geriatric worker) said: "I've heard that the pills give you good protection from pregnancy, but they may cause many complications in the future... many women gain weight and have headaches... I think it is very unhealthy to take hormonal preparations every day – I'd rather rely on more traditional methods and hope for good luck." Younger women who came of age in the US had a more relaxed view of these matters, expected greater sexual responsibility from their male partners and were less cautious of modern hormonal contraceptives. "I know that most men dislike using condoms, which, they say, is like eating candy in its wrap. But why should I care for their pleasure before my own well-being? This is simple: if he doesn't take care of me he is not the right man to count on in the future, so I won't bother if he quits the relationship." (Inga, 27). "I never take chances in the bed, especially with a new man. I am on the pill, but if I am not fully sure about his past (and who can be sure?) I also ask to put on a condom. In my experience, most men don't mind – it serves for their protection too." (Natasha, student, 24).

As for an ideal age for having children, most women believed that long delays are problematic as your 'biological clock' keeps ticking, and it is much healthier to bear children while young. "I am not for rushing with the first baby as a 'validity proof' of your marriage, but long delays are also dangerous. You know, the timing is almost never right – either you are in a graduate school, or looking for a job, or having no money to buy a house... children always call for amendments and compromises, and the woman is usually the one to make them." "For most young Russian women I know becoming a mother is at least as important as finishing their education or getting a good job. You are not a complete woman as long as you don't have a child". (Nina, 29, marketing agent, mother of a 5 year old). No woman I spoke with was ready to delay marriage to her late 30s and/or remain childless like many educated American women do. Despite their strong education and career orientations, marriage and children remained a priority on their personal agenda. Even lesbian women voiced their wish for motherhood in the future. "You have a wish for a child regardless of your sexual tastes, this is completely unrelated. Lesbians are as good

*(or as bad) in mothering as are the straights; it depends on your personality, your feelings about children, your educational beliefs, etc. So yes, I plan to have a child in a few years' time – by whatever technical means are available, or maybe via adoption.”* (Lisa, 27, architect, lives with a female partner).

In terms of the number of children they wished for, most women said two, but some said that three kids would be ideal for them, and a few women said they would suffice with one child. Several women said that having siblings is important for the children, and a single child is often lonely and unsocial. As for the childcare roles of the parents, most women said that they were prepared to carry out the bulk of the parenting tasks as their careers were usually less demanding than these of their husbands. No one expected their male partners to sacrifice their careers or incomes in the name of childcare; quite a few expected to get help from their parents or hire nannies. In sum, young women of Russian Jewish origin expressed opinions and attitudes rather similar to those of American middle class youth, with the exception of their emphasis on a relatively early marriage and motherhood and the expectation of help in childcare from the parents. They strongly opt for Russian Jewish men as their boyfriends and marital partners believing that they share common values about the importance of family life, gender roles, children's education, and the normality of 'commitment' for both men and women.

### ***Attitudes towards Western Feminism and American Sexual Mores***

Most former Soviet women share uneasy feelings towards third-wave western feminism, at least at the level of ideology (not necessarily practice). Coming from a society where a 'woman's question' has been 'solved' by the regime by eliminating sex differentials by decree, these women have a deep seated mistrust for any kind of gender equality rhetoric. In the times of 'real socialism' this equality meant that women were exploited by the state as badly as men, employed in physically demanding 'male' jobs and paid similarly miserable wages for their eight hour work days, supplemented by the payless second shift at home. Under Socialism, the state gave women free but miserable health care insensitive to their special needs, as well as cheap but low quality childcare facilities that resulted in frequent sickness and slow development of their children. Whoever could afford it, preferred to have a nanny or stay-at-home grandparents as private child minders. Ostensibly unhampered by the

glass ceiling, actual occupational mobility of educated women was slow and even in the feminized occupations such as health care and education women rarely reached senior positions. Regardless of their initial aspirations and years of study, many women ended up making their living in dead-end semi-clerical or technical jobs. Being male, non-Jewish and a Communist Party member were important prerequisites for occupational mobility in virtually any branch of Soviet economy up until late 1980s. Human sexuality and the needs in sex education and family planning services have been for decades ignored by the state, resulting in millions of abortions, infertility and sexually transmitted diseases. By way of black irony, the Soviet society that officially denounced sex differences and sexuality itself, was perhaps one of the most sexist and misogynistic societies ever known (Kon, 1995).

But pressure always causes resistance of a similar strength. Precisely because the state undermined femininity and tried to mould all citizens as sexless Soviet people, many women resisted this reality by finding multiple ways to underscore and valorize their feminine side. Deprived of most means for preserving their bodies, health and beauty enjoyed by the women in the west, many Soviet women invested great skill and effort and spent their last cash on fashionable clothes and cosmetics (thanks to the thriving black market), sew and knitted clothes themselves, exchanged fashion magazines smuggled from abroad, and against all odds managed to dress and look well. The harder to get were these feminine commodities the more desirable they became for the struggling, overworked and underpaid Soviet woman (Kay, 1997).

In brief, seven decades of allegedly genderless state socialism made many former Soviet women yearn for a more traditional role division whereby they could devote more time and resources to their perceived 'natural role' of beauty ideals, caregivers, child educators and homemakers, while men would regain their due place in economy, with the ensuing authority, upward mobility and the ability to earn a family wage. On the domestic front, men are expected to 'help' women when they can with domestic chores and childrearing. This unattainable pre-revolutionary bourgeois ideal of femininity and masculinity had lingered in the minds and hearts of Soviet women for decades, coloring their negative perceptions of western feminism, that (on the surface of its rhetoric) pushed women back to the 'equality heaven' which they so ardently wished to escape. Unable to distinguish between various streams within modern feminist thought, many Soviet women identified feminist ideology with men hate, negation of marriage and motherhood, undermining physiological and

psychological differentials between men and women, pushing women into competitive and harsh male occupational niches where they do not belong, disapproval of feminine beauty, sexual appeal and self-care, and butch-lesbian lifestyle as its logical ending. This line of ideological attributions has been repeatedly voiced by former Soviet women when asked to describe how they understand feminism and why even the most educated, independent and successful of them would never call themselves feminists (Kay, 1997).

However, life in America has somewhat redressed these negative attitudes. To begin with, many immigrant women have realized that an ideal of a single male breadwinner has largely dwindled in American middle class (let alone more disadvantaged groups) and the majority of women have to work outside the home in order to ensure decent living standards for their families. Secondly, many women have realized that feminism spans a broad range of ideas, and its liberal stream is very much in line with their own beliefs and practices as educated working women. In the words of Rita, 38 (married and mother of a teenage son, former engineer, now interior designer):

I think that the chief message of liberal feminists is that men and women are different but equal and should have equal opportunities in education and careers. How women use these opportunities is up to them, not everybody has an ambition to become a solid professional, many women have modest aspirations of just making a decent living and having a good family, and that's perfectly OK. So do many men, by the way. Your life style should be a matter of choice: if you wish to be a homemaker and can afford it – that's great, but if you want to be a corporal lawyer – it is also your right to go out there and try it, and no one can stop you. People should be judged by merit not by sex. This is how I understand the message of feminism as part of a general liberal worldview.

Some other informants opined that the feminist ideology stripes women of their attractiveness, femininity and sex appeal – which is their main naturally coming 'human capital'. To explain this view, they often cited the exaggerations in the implementation of sexual harassment laws in the workplace. The following accounts were typical:

Americans are taking this principle way over the board – you cannot de-sexualize human beings, this is ridiculous. If these laws are taken to their logical end, all employees should become neuter, sexless beings, or at least become blind to each other, not to notice how others look, what they wear, etc. Judging by the instructions disseminated in my firm by the human resources office, any wrong glance, playful

comment or a joke told in the elevator can be interpreted as sexual claims and be punished. This sterilization of human contact reeks of communism in some tricky way – everybody should be the same, wearing uniform plain clothes, not causing attention of the opposite sex... (Dina)

I am not telling that bosses should compel their secretaries to sleep with them, this is repulsive, but you cannot stop all and any sexually charged dialog between co-workers. This is the place where people spend most of their time, meet others, including potential dates...how can you ban sexual innuendo between people by decree? Again, I am against using sexuality as a form of payment for a job or promotion, but current rules are taking this too far. Almost anyone can sue or be sued for sexual harassment these days, and some people can use this to get even with their rivals or foes (Veronika, 40, IT officer in a large corporation)

Others had a slightly different take on the sexual harassment issue. Tanya, a 43-year old medical imaging technician, shared her thoughts:

In my lab in Russia I always remembered that I was a woman – my male co-workers made a point of reminding this to me: they noticed my new hairdo, would never miss a chance to pay a compliment... they simply meant to be nice and friendly most of the time – this was how a man was supposed to relate to a woman. Kind of being a gentleman... But of course other things also happened – when your boss, say, invited you to his dacha (country cottage - LR) while his wife was in the city, and when you rejected his advances he got cross and denied your salary raise or put you in the least wanted night shift... this is indeed a shame. It happened quite a lot in Russia, at least in medical settings, where senior doctors were so powerful and nurses, medical interns, and technicians were kind of in their service... But you had no power to resist these rules of the game, if you did not comply ... you won't be fired most probably but you will pay the price - your work terms would become lousy. Now, here the very climate is very different. At my first American job I was stricken by this atmosphere, I couldn't even name this feeling for a while... you are treated as a genderless colleague, nobody makes a point of your being a female. At first I felt uneasy about this – no one seemed to notice how I looked, what I wore – and I used to think of myself as an attractive woman, this indifference kind of offended me at first ... but over time I realized that this kind of attitude is much healthier. It keeps people's lower instincts in check and does not allow men (and women too sometimes!) to use their administrative power to procure sexual favors from the weaker employees. And in general, a sex-neutral workplace is more pleasant, you don't feel constantly evaluated and judged as a woman. Over time I put aside my high heels and silk blouses and started wearing old jeans and trainers to work like everyone else."

Discussing sexual conduct of young Americans, some women mentioned their own adolescent or young adult children as an example of a more relaxed and accepting sexual attitudes than they had had as young women in the FSU. *“Today young people know so much more about sex and intimacy than we did, and I think this is very good for them. Ignorance in these matters brings so much misery, especially for the girls... Today’s young women are much more assertive, they know how to protect themselves, how to say no to a guy... No sex without condom! (laughs). I think AIDS epidemics in a way did a good service to American sexual practices, people became more cautious...”* Some women brought up the subject of sex education, a very difficult topic in the former Soviet culture. *“I think that mothers must talk about sex with their children, daughters and sons alike. Americans are more open in this regard than are Russian parents... we tend to shy away from these delicate topics till it’s too late and your kid gets into trouble. Children must be given some basic knowledge of sexuality from their preschool years on... I find it difficult to discuss these matters with my kids, but I have always found good readings for them, so I hope I have helped them get some useful knowledge for their future private lives...”* (Inna, 56, a community worker).

Some informants reflected on the differences between former Soviet and American sexual cultures in general. *“I think that most Americans are actually quite conservative in their sexual attitudes and conduct, this was a surprising discovery for me after Soviet propaganda about American sexual license, pornography industry, strip clubs, etc. In fact, after the end of Socialism Russia itself has been swept by the wave of commercial erotica and sex for sale of all possible kinds... The amount of graphic sexual material on television, in the movies and in video shops in Russia is just outrageous, and it is not sold in special discrete places but is on display in every subway crosswalk. In Europe too, especially in Germany and Sweden, I’ve seen many images that would never pass on American TV, beach nudity is common... Here in the US Howard Stern’s shows are among the only sexual teasers remaining in broad circulation, and everything else is strictly X-rated and kept off the eyes of youth...”* (Vera, 52, former teacher, now eldercare worker). *“It seems to me that sexual freedoms in this country exist only on the two coasts, but not in the real middle of America... The debates about access to abortion, gay marriage, sex education at schools are overlaid with conservatism and religious indoctrination. Even unmarried mothers are frowned at in many places, while in Europe, and in big Russian cities*

*too, single mothering is becoming common. You cannot even dream of telling a sexually charged joke to your colleagues at work... I have lived in England for some time, so it is difficult for me to get used to American prudery” (Lena, 37, a journalist, a single mother of a 10 year old girl).*

Other women, on the contrary, found similarities between Russian and American sex cultures. *“In many ways Russians and Americans are similar in their values. At least in my own social circle, most men and women still believe in marriage and family life, and devote much time to their spouses and children. Or maybe these are just universal Jewish values, because most of my American friends are Jewish too...” (Inna, 56). Irena, 34, a nurse and a mother of two, said: “I think that people’s basic wishes and instincts are the same everywhere, in America they are just filtered through the culture of political correctness so people are more restrained in their expression. Another factor here is fear of law suits, sexual harassment is a scarecrow for many men... as a result people’s conduct becomes more polite if not to say sterile...and you can seldom guess what they really think or feel. I think that Russians in America are still more natural and tend to speak out their mind, pursue women they like more openly, tell sexual (and sexist!) jokes and laugh at them... I think most Americans would consider us very rude if they could understand our internal chats in Russian...”*

Thinking aloud about the ways in which their lives as women have changed in America, several women mentioned the evolution of their clothing style from hyper-feminine and flashy to more subdued, simple and driven by comfort rather than looks. Olga, a 49-year old accountant in an investment company, said:

When I first saw American women – you know, my neighbors, co-workers, etc. – I was taken aback by the plainness and lack of style in their dress... they did not seem to care how they looked, just picking up any clean items from the dryer, not coordinating colors, wearing outdated models...And look at the abundance in the stores – you can dress like a queen, and it even doesn’t cost so much. American women have no zest for clothes. In Moscow I would spend quite some time dressing and making up my face and hair before going to work, and these women hardly bothered to put any makeup... Well, after ten years, look at me now: I dress in plain trousers and flat shoes like everyone else, I don’t remember when did I last pluck my brows or made up my eyes... Does it mean that I became sloppy? Old and uninteresting for anyone? I don’t know, it surely makes life easier, but

at the same time I often feel like I lost some important part of who I am and my old life as a woman.

It took me time to figure out how to relate to my good-looking and friendly American boss. He seemed to like me a lot, paid more attention to me than to other women in the office. My first instinct would tell me to smile back and flirt, to show that I like him too, to make him feel good about his manhood. In these first months I tried to dress my best, went to a hairdresser every week... But soon a senior female colleague let me know indirectly that I was overplaying it, that my flirtation can get me in trouble. She was the first one to tell me about sexual harassment laws (I never heard the term before) and I understood that if I wish to keep my job I have to play it sexless, like other women. So I turned down my light bulb and became invisible. This guy, my boss, seemed sad at this change of mood at first, but probably the wise ladies spoke with him too and he withdrew. Until this day I think that maybe I lost the romance of my life... (Marina, 35, computer company employee).

It seems so unfair, even absurd – this ban on flirting and relationships with men whom you work with. We spend 8-9 hours every day at work and don't really have much of a chance for meeting new people outside the workplace. Then, almost every man in the office is senior to me, so when and if he pays attention it is labeled sexual harassment and he is at risk. Tell, me where else can I meet a prospective partner? (Tania, 29, secretary in an investment firm).

Thus, women whom I interviewed expressed a range of opinions as to American sexual culture and the role of feminism and political correctness in its regulation. Most perceived their own moral education and sexual expression to be quite different from that of their American peers, although they could not always define these differences. Some women were appreciative of the restraints for open expressions of sexism and male chauvinism installed by the feminist movement in most American institutions, while others regarded them as excessive and stifling. Most women admitted that their own attitudes and lifestyles have evolved over time embracing many American notions and rules of self-expression at least in the public domain (workplace, school, etc.). This included changed styles of clothing, hairdo and makeup (from flashy and hyper-feminine to more subdued) and keeping a neutral demeanor with the male bosses at work in place of former flirtation. At the same time, most women grew more tolerant of the sexual expression in their adolescent children, accepting their girl/boy friends and trying to discuss with them condom use rather than marital prospects. At the same time, Russian women still feel uncomfortable discussing sexually-related subjects and have clear difficulty formulating their ideas

in a polite and ‘cultured’ way. As the Russian language is rather limited in its sexual lexicon (which is either rude or dryly medical), many women who touched upon these subjects included English words and expressions in their Russian speech. Younger women were considerably more at ease in this domain of discussion than older women, regardless of their formal education and the length of life in America. However, most women agreed with the idea that being a woman in America is different from being a woman in Russia or Ukraine. Most women, though, believed that their feminine lives had taken a positive turn in America, both due to material factors (better living conditions, access to better health and social services, rich consumer choice) and a less sexually charged social environment.

## **Conclusion**

This ethnographic study sheds some new light on the process of social adjustment of former Soviet women as immigrants in the US, and in this way contributes to the contemporary feminist scholarship on immigrant women and social transformations of femininity after socialism. It shows that, like in other immigrant and minority groups, the culture of Russian Jewish immigrants is a result of the interplay between continuity and change, i.e. a hybrid of their homeland and American values and lifestyles. Most Jewish women from the FSU remain secular in their outlook and practices, but over time they adopt elements of the mainstream American cultural Judaism, which helps them join the informal networks of their local co-ethnics. While more Jewish immigrant women in the US than in Israel, Canada and most European countries can afford to leave paid employment and become full-time homemakers (due to high earning capacity of their husbands), rather few of them choose that option. The need for an occupational life and self-actualization, as well as economic independence, is deeply ingrained in Russian/Soviet cultural tradition spanning at least two generations of women. At the same time, most women had to reinvent themselves in order to adjust to the American labor market and trade their former ‘masculine’ technology-related occupations for more ‘feminine’ ones in human services, sales, clerking, etc. Quite often women believed that this change was for the better and found meaning and satisfaction in their new jobs. A similar tendency towards acceptance and adjustment to the new work roles among Russian

immigrant women (much more than in their male counterparts) was shown in my earlier research among different occupational groups of immigrants in Israel (Remennick, 2001, 2002b, 2003).

While preserving many of their old ideas about marriage, childbearing and work-family divide, most immigrant women have adopted more liberal attitudes towards premarital sex and non-marital relationships. Most Russian-speakers strongly prefer their co-ethnics as intimate partners for themselves and their children; mixed marriages with Americans are rare even among the 1.5 generation women who spent many years in the US and speak fluent English. A similar tendency towards ethno-cultural endogamy is apparent among Russian speaking immigrants in Israel and in other hosting countries (Remennick, 2005). One possible explanation of this tendency is preservation of strong intergenerational ties in Russian immigrant families and parental influence on their children's partner choice. Another lies in a strong belief of cultural gap between themselves and their American peers. After forming their own families, most young Russian Jewish women preserve a mutual support network with their parents, although no longer live with them in the same household.

Although coming to America with strong negative attitudes towards western feminist ideology, many immigrants come to appreciate over time the gains it brought to women, especially in the workplace. At the same time, many Russian immigrants find legal campaigns against male chauvinism (in the form of sexual harassment) excessive and 'sterilizing' gender relations in the public domain. Despite their critical perceptions of the legal implications of feminism in the workplace and politics, most working immigrant women have adopted a pragmatic stance towards local 'rules of the game' and altered their dressing style and general demeanor to conform to the American norms of feminine self-presentation. It is difficult to directly juxtapose sexual aspects of immigrants women's adjustment in Israel and the US as gender relations in the public domain are much less regulated in the former than in the latter, and sexual harassment complaints and lawsuits in Israel remain an exception rather than a norm. In that sense there is a much lesser cultural change in gender attitudes for Russian women to embrace in Israel than in the US, although the exposure of these women to actual sexual harassment and exploitation in Israel is probably much higher (Remennick, 1999a). Reflecting different social contexts of the post-communist immigrant wave in different hosting countries, Russian immigrant women in the US were largely spared the bad sexual reputation they have been imbued with in the

Israeli media and mass culture, but nevertheless had relatively few intimate relationships with American men.

In sum, former Soviet women as immigrants in the US manifested a remarkable adaptive potential, resilience and strength in their new lives, combining new modes of self-actualization with the on-going responsibility for their loved ones. Similar conclusions were made in my earlier research in Israel (Remennick, 2001) and in other hosting countries, particularly in Canada (Remennick, 2004). Other American scholars who wrote about former Soviet Jewish women have also underscored their good adjustment skills, ability to shoulder work and family roles, and develop multiple social ties with the new society (Orleck, 2001:164). Following the processes of Americanization (versus lingering Russian-ness) among young immigrant women of Soviet origin is a challenging task for the future scholars of immigration and gender. Comparative research on former Soviet women and femininity in the context of immigration to different western societies is another prospective development of this research stream.

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