Promoting Women’s Leadership in Russian Science: Impact of Grant-Awarding Foundations

Irina Dezhina

In the course of democratic development in Russia the gender aspects, problems of women’s equality in science are becoming an important issue. In Soviet period the science sphere was quite feminized: the share of women-researchers was close to 45% and in selected disciplines (such as biology, medicine, and social sciences) it was up to 60%. However there was only an outward appearance of equality and the “glass ceiling” was quite strong because men occupied all highest research and administrative positions in science. The command economic system did not promote real opportunities for women to become leaders in science.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union Russian science found itself in a deep crisis because of ten-fold cuts in its budgetary support. It was the time when different non-government organizations (mostly foreign foundations) came to aid to Russian science. Their initial goals were related to saving best researchers in Russia and preventing the brain drain as well as nonproliferation of former military research sector. Aside of that, as a parallel priority, foundations intended to promote democratic values in research community – such as building civil society and fostering opportunities for women-researchers to develop their careers in science. These were the new values not only for science but also for the Russian society as a whole.

Gender problems were not quite recognized in Russian research community: feminist studies started to develop in Russia only in the beginning of 90-s. The surveys conducted in mid-end of 90-s have revealed that not only men but also women-researchers are not perceptive to gender aspects of their work and to career development. Therefore foreign foundations had to develop their activity in not quite ready to it environment.

The problems of gender equality in science were widely studied abroad. In the borders of mainstream literature during last ten years there appeared a number of analytical works devoted to the work of grant system and grant-awarding foundations in respect to gender aspects in science. One of the first papers in this area, called “Nepotism and Sexism in Peer-Review”, was published by C.Wenneras and A.Wold1. One of the recent comprehensive reports that also contains analysis of application and grant distributions among women and men researchers was published in 2002 by the ETAN Expert working group on Women and Science2.

In Russia there are several papers that summarize statistical data from Russian government foundations on demographic profile of grantees. However these works do not contain analysis of impact of non-government grant awarding foundations on developing of leadership opportunities for women-researchers. It is evident that foundations bring more independence and alternative to researchers, and thus give women-researchers a chance to grow professionally and develop leadership skills. But there is only anecdotal evidence of whether and to what extent women could utilize this opportunity.

Therefore in 2002-2003 the author conducted mail survey of women-researchers that was complemented by in-depth interviews with selected women-scholars from 10 regions of Russia who have experience to applying to foundations and succeeded in receiving grants and who are highly qualified (have at least candidate degree in their fields of studies). 46 women participated in the interviews. The major goal of the survey was to assess the impact of grant-awarding foundations on professional development of women-researchers as well as to understand the attitudes to gender problems in Russian research community. A special “expert” group of men-researchers was also interviewed for comparative purposes. The men who took part in the interview are leading researchers and at the same time all of them hold administrative positions and in this way they influence gender policy in their research institutes and universities.

The paper will describe the major results of the survey such as:

- The place and role of women in research organizations, factors that hamper the development of their leadership;
- Attitudes to grant system in general and to grant awarding foundations in particular;
- The level of success of women in obtaining grants;
- Influence of foundations on professional development and to career development of women-researchers;
- Necessity of special programs for women-researchers, preferable types of such programs and major targeted groups among women.

The results of such survey are important not only for Russia and for broader international audience. Transition societies may learn from the Russian experience the peculiarities of the development of democratic values through the work of science foundations. Developed Western countries represent donors that promote these values in Russia and the analysis of the results of their activity may help to suggest new initiatives or better adjust the current ones.